



Brick by Brick: Nehemiah and Leading Change

By Dr. Martin Spoelstra - Jan 2026

Introduction

Nehemiah and *Leading Change*

Over the years, I've become increasingly convinced that one of the great challenges facing the church today is not a lack of faith or commitment, but a growing hesitation to lead change. Across many denominations, including my own, I have watched congregations struggle to adapt, innovate, and respond faithfully to the realities around them. Too often, change is treated as something to endure rather than something to steward. That is one of the reasons I find the book of Nehemiah so compelling.

Nehemiah is not simply a spiritual leader; **he is a change leader**. He guides a traumatized, weary people through a process of transformation that is spiritual, organizational, emotional, and deeply practical. And what has struck me most over time is how closely Nehemiah's leadership aligns with what modern leadership theory describes as effective transformational change.

In particular, I have found **John Kotter's book *Leading Change***, an international bestseller first published in 2012 and updated in 2016, to be an unexpectedly helpful companion to the biblical text. Kotter outlines a clear, step-by-step framework for leading large-scale change, developed through decades of research and practice and widely used in business, nonprofit, and institutional settings. At first glance, it might seem unusual to place a Harvard Business Review leadership model alongside Scripture. **Yet when I read Nehemiah carefully, I see the same patterns.**

Kotter's steps describe leadership realities that Nehemiah was already practicing centuries earlier. Creating urgency. Building a guiding coalition. Casting a compelling vision. Communicating it repeatedly. Empowering people to act. Celebrating visible progress. Consolidating gains. Anchoring change in culture. These are biblical dynamics.

What I appreciate about Kotter's framework is that it gives language and structure to something the church often senses intuitively but struggles to articulate. It helps leaders slow down, reflect, and move intentionally rather than reactively. When read through the lens of Scripture, it becomes clear that effective change leadership is not opposed to spiritual faithfulness, it often depends on it.



Nehemiah does not rebuild Jerusalem with a single dramatic act. The wall is restored slowly, section by section, by families, priests, officials, and laborers working side by side. Progress is visible, yet it is incremental. Some days involve breakthroughs; others involve exhaustion, resistance, and discouragement. Yet the wall rises, brick by brick.

This book is my attempt to hold those two worlds together. Each chapter follows one step in John Kotter's framework as a lens for reading Nehemiah's leadership. Throughout these chapters, I will trace Kotter's steps for leading change alongside Nehemiah's leadership journey to show how God works through ordinary leaders who are willing to pray, plan, listen, act, and persevere.

Brick by Brick

Several years ago, I preached a sermon series called "Brick by Brick: A Study in Nehemiah". The phrase *brick by brick* has become more than a sermon title for me, it is a way of understanding how real change actually happens.

That is how change happens in churches. That is how change happens in leadership. That is how change happens in our own lives.

This book is written for leaders who are willing to embrace that kind of work. Steady, prayerfully, and rooted in obedience. Changes that lasts are rarely dramatic. It is built patiently, faithfully, and together brick by brick.

Why Churches Struggle with Change, and Why Nehemiah Still Matters

God has always worked this way. He places **ordinary people** into moments that require faith, courage, and perseverance. God is looking for everyday people; people with doubts, limits, responsibilities, and fears to lead. When God places someone in a position of leadership, He also calls them to keep moving toward the future He has given, even when the path forward is unclear.

For some leaders, that future is modest and faithful. For others, God entrusts something larger. When God assigns a mountain, He also supplies *mountain-matching grace*. Nehemiah is an example of this truth.

Underneath the title and responsibility, Nehemiah was an ordinary man. He was a civil servant, faithful, observant, prayerful, living far from his homeland. Yet in God's hands, Nehemiah emerged as one of the most significant leaders in Israel's history. Nehemiah was attentive to God, shaped by prayer, and willing to act when the burden became clear.

Leadership for Churches That Want Change

Churches don't resist change because they are faithless. They resist change because change costs something. Many church leaders find themselves in a difficult and honest place. They sense that something needs to change; **but they are unsure how to begin** without doing harm along the way.

They ask real questions, such as:

We know something needs to change, but how do we begin without breaking trust?

How do we honor our past while moving toward a different future?

How do we lead people who are tired, cautious, or unsure, but still faithful?

What does change look like when you are not starting from scratch?

These are not questions that come from weak leadership. They come from leaders who care deeply about the people they serve and the future they're responsible for.

Preface

Nehemiah's story fits churches like this. He doesn't lead change by standing above the people, but by working among them. He pays attention to people before he worries about progress. He moves forward without pretending the work will be easy or the resistance will disappear. At every step, Nehemiah reminds us that spiritual renewal and organizational change belong together. You cannot have one without the other.

Ordinary People, Extraordinary Task

The story of Nehemiah shows us something familiar about the way God works. Again and again, God entrusts significant responsibility to ordinary people who are willing to care and to act. Nehemiah wasn't remarkable because of his position or background. What set him apart was his concern for his people and his refusal to ignore what he heard about Jerusalem's condition. God met that concern with a task far larger than Nehemiah could have handled on his own.

When Nehemiah enters the story, the temple had already been rebuilt. The city itself was still vulnerable. For decades, the walls remained broken, leaving Jerusalem exposed and its people discouraged. Nehemiah didn't come as a military leader or a political powerbroker. He was a cupbearer, someone whose leadership had been formed quietly through faithfulness, trust, and daily responsibility in a foreign court. Nehemiah's strength as a leader did not come from his résumé. It came from the way he paid attention.

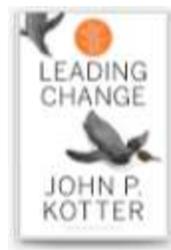
He prayed before reacting. **He took time to see the problem for himself. He named the situation honestly and then invited others to share in the work.** Nehemiah reminds us that leadership is rarely about dramatic gestures. More often, it begins with spiritual attentiveness and moves forward through careful, faithful action.

As we walk through Nehemiah's journey, we'll use a framework for leading change as a guide, not as a formula, but as a way of paying attention to what is happening beneath the surface. Nehemiah's story makes clear that real change does not happen overnight. It unfolds through obedience, persistence, and trust, brick by brick, as God shapes both the work and the people called to do it.

A Roadmap for Change:

Eight Lessons from the Book of Nehemiah

The chapters in this book follow a clear pathway for leading change, one that is both deeply biblical and widely recognized in contemporary leadership theory. I have intentionally aligned the story of Nehemiah with the eight-stage process for leading transformational change outlined by **John Kotter** in



Leading Change. What struck me as I studied both was how closely Nehemiah's leadership mirrors the steps Kotter describes, nearly 2,500 years earlier.

Each chapter in this book explores one of these steps through the lens of Nehemiah's story, personal leadership experience, and practical application. Together, they form a **brick-by-brick approach to leading change**, patient, faithful, and grounded in God's work among ordinary people.

1. Establishing a Sense of Urgency

Change begins when reality can no longer be ignored.

Nehemiah first hears of Jerusalem's condition from his brother Hanani, who describes the people as being "in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire" (Nehemiah 1:3-4). Later, after personally surveying the damage, Nehemiah names the crisis plainly to the city's leaders: "You see the trouble we are in" (2:17).

Urgency is not manufactured panic; it is truthful clarity.

2. Creating a Guiding Coalition

No meaningful change is ever led alone.

Nehemiah begins by building support with King Artaxerxes, securing permission, protection, and resources for the work ahead (2:6-8). From there, he forms a coalition that includes officials, nobles, the high priest, priests, and Levites (2:16). This group becomes the relational and spiritual backbone of the rebuilding effort.

3. Developing a Vision and Strategy

Vision grows out of reality, not abstraction.

Before speaking publicly, Nehemiah surveys the walls himself. Only then does he cast a compelling vision: rebuilding the walls so Jerusalem will no longer live in disgrace (2:17-18). He does not have every detail figured out, yet he has enough information to move forward with confidence and purpose.

4. Communicating the Change Vision

Vision spreads when leaders embody it.

Nehemiah communicates the vision not only through words, yet through visible action. He places the high priest at the front of the rebuilding effort (3:3), followed by priests (3:28) and Levites (4:17). Their participation signals that this work matters, and that faithfulness is expected of everyone.

5. Empowering Broad-Based Action

Obstacles must be named and removed.

As the work progresses, Nehemiah faces both external opposition and internal injustice. When threats arise from surrounding enemies, he prays and implements a defensive strategy so the people can work without fear (4:7-23). When economic exploitation threatens unity, he confronts the nobles and insists on reform (5:1-12).

Empowerment requires courage and moral clarity.

6. Generating Short-Term Wins

Visible progress fuels perseverance.

Nehemiah organizes the work around specific gates and assigns sections of the wall to families who live nearby. Each completed section becomes a tangible win the community can see and celebrate (3:1, 3, 6, 13; 3:10, 28-30). Momentum grows as people witness real progress.

7. Consolidating Gains and Producing More Change

Leadership multiplication sustains momentum.

Once the wall is rebuilt, Nehemiah appoints Hanani and Hananiah, leaders known for integrity and reverence for God, to oversee the city (7:2). Their leadership enables new initiatives, including the rebuilding of homes for those returning from exile (7:1–7). Change deepens as responsibility is shared.

8. Anchoring New Approaches in the Culture

Lasting change must be spiritually rooted.

Nehemiah invites Ezra to read the Book of the Law publicly, anchoring the physical rebuilding of the city in God's covenant promises (Nehemiah 8:1–12; Deuteronomy 30:1–6). As the people hear and understand God's Word, renewal takes hold at the heart level, not just the structural level.

Culture changes when obedience becomes shared practice.

JumpStart and *Brick by Brick*: Two Tools, One Journey

As I've walked alongside churches and leaders over the years, one question keeps coming back:

"We sense God calling us to something new... but where do we begin?"

That question is the reason [JumpStart](#) exists.

JumpStart was created as a guided pathway for churches and leaders who are ready to move from ideas to Spirit-led action. It is designed for pastors, leadership teams, and emerging ministry pioneers who feel a holy restlessness, an awareness that God is inviting them to start something new, however, they don't have a clear roadmap for how to begin. This e-book, *Brick by Brick*, and the JumpStart course are meant to work together.

Think of [JumpStart](#) as the **hands-on lab**, and *Brick by Brick* as the **biblical narrative and leadership lens** that grounds the work. JumpStart helps leaders discern, clarify, and take first steps. Nehemiah helps us understand *why* those steps matter, *how* resistance and discouragement emerge, and *what kind of leadership* sustains change over time.

Both are rooted in the same conviction: God does His renewing work patiently, intentionally, and relationally, brick by brick.

What is JumpStart?

[JumpStart](#) is not a program you "run" or a strategy you impose. It is a guided process that helps leaders notice where God is already at work, gather the right people, and take faithful next steps, whether that leads to a neighborhood outreach, a discipleship pathway, a new worshiping community, or another expression of Kingdom mission.

JumpStart equips leaders to:

- Listen prayerfully before acting
- Move from vague ideas to clear ministry focus
- Form a small, aligned leadership team
- Communicate vision with clarity and honesty
- Take concrete, achievable first steps

In other words, JumpStart helps leaders *start something new without pretending they have everything figured out*. That should sound familiar if you've read Nehemiah.

"I sense God calling me or us, to more, but I don't know where to begin," then you are exactly where both Nehemiah and JumpStart begin. Brick by brick.

Why Pair JumpStart with Nehemiah?

Nehemiah offers us more than inspiration. It gives us a lived example of Spirit-led change:

- Urgency shaped by prayer
- Vision grounded in reality

Leadership shared

Resistance addressed

JumpStart provides practical tools and exercises to help leaders walk that same path today. *Brick by Brick* provides the theological depth, biblical wisdom, and pastoral reflection that keeps the work from becoming mechanical or rushed. Throughout this e-book, you'll find **JumpStart side-boxes**, short reflections, questions, and practices that invite you to pause, apply, and discern. They are designed to help you move from reading to reflection, and from reflection to action.

Starting Something New Is Personal Before It's Organizational

One of the reasons I believe so deeply in pairing JumpStart with Nehemiah is this: **change is never only institutional; it is always personal**. JumpStart acknowledges that reality. It invites leaders to pay attention not only to systems and structures, but also to calling, gifting, fatigue, fear, and hope. The goal is not simply to launch something new, but to cultivate a culture where ordinary believers take Spirit-led risks together.

If you are reading this e-book and thinking,

Chapter 1 - The Mark of a Serious Leader

Nehemiah Chapter 1 | Kotter Step 1

Every leader eventually faces a moment that reveals their instincts. Something surfaces that cannot be ignored. A situation presses in. And before plans are made or conversations begin, one question quietly shapes everything that follows.

Where do I go first? Nehemiah begins with prayer. When Nehemiah hears about the condition of Jerusalem, there is no rush to action. No organizing. No problem-solving. No attempt to fix what is broken. Scripture tells us instead:

Nehemiah 1:4 (Unless mentioned all scripture is the New Living Translation) "When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven."

Nehemiah was a person of prayer before he became a builder. Every meaningful journey of change begins with urgency, an honest recognition that something cannot stay the way it is.

John Kotter describes this first step in leading change as **creating a sense of urgency** by naming a significant opportunity or crisis clearly enough that people are compelled to act. Without urgency, change stalls. People remain comfortable, cautious, or distracted. With urgency, energy is released, focus sharpens, and people begin to move.

The book of Nehemiah opens with Nehemiah serving faithfully in the court of King Artaxerxes when a simple question changes everything. He asks his brother Hanani how things are going back home in Jerusalem.

Nehemiah 1:3 "Things are not going well for those who returned to the province of Judah. They are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem has been torn down, and the gates have been destroyed by fire."

Something deeply personal something spiritual is activated in the heart of Nehemiah. When he hears the condition of the city of God and the state of the walls his response is grief. He weeps. He mourns. He fasts. He prays. For 4 to 5 months Nehemiah sits with this reality and restrains himself long enough to sit with this before God. As a younger man I would have rushed ahead and started something. After many years of running ahead of God I can see how wise this was. By the time the king finally asks him why he looks so troubled, not only has he had time to think about the problem, but this might be God's way of giving him an open door to act.

Nehemiah's emotional response and the reality of the situation in Jerusalem created the sense of urgency but prayer provided clarity. I've learned over time – too often the hard way – that the same is true in congregational life. Urgency rarely begins with strategy. It begins by paying attention to what God is stirring and refusing to ignore uncomfortable truths.

In our own journey as a church during a time of rapid growth, creating a sense of urgency did not come from running out of space or chasing growth metrics. It came from wrestling with a deeper question: *How do we remain faithful to the call to make disciples while preserving the kind of close, relational community we believe is essential to discipleship?* For years, we had been living in a tension between growth and intimacy, between expanding God's kingdom and maintaining a worshiping community small enough to know one another well.

After returning from my sabbatical, I brought this question to our leadership and asked if we could intentionally revisit one of our core values, Kingdom expansion. I felt that we had been ignoring the reality of what Kingdom expansion might look like. Without realizing it, we had shifted much of our energy inward. Our discipleship was deepening but our outward focus on servant evangelism, our presence in the community, and our desire to multiply was being replaced by more inward endeavours. That's what **created urgency**.

We entered a season of discernment, prayer, listening, and shared exploration. A design team examined several possible paths forward: missional communities, church planting, and multisite ministry. I intentionally held my own opinions back, not wanting my role to shape the outcome prematurely. When the process concluded, the group was unanimous. Multisite was the direction they believed God was leading us.

We invited the entire congregation into a season of prayer, asking them to listen for God's direction alongside us. Over thirty days, through prayer gatherings and personal reflection, clarity emerged. What we heard from all of the groups was the same, God was asking us to multiply.

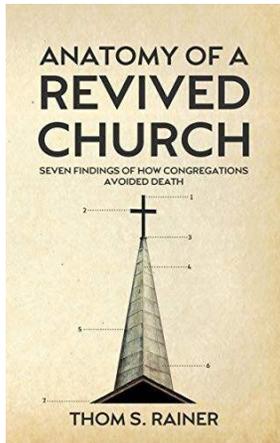
Looking back, I can see that this season mirrored Nehemiah's experience more closely than I realized at the time. The urgency came out of the lack of fruitfulness not faithfulness. There is a recognition that we are being faithful to God but ignoring the possibilities of being more fruitful. It also required personal change. As the Pastor, I had to name where I was no longer leading from my strengths and ask permission to re-engage gifts that had been set aside.

Kotter is right: urgency is essential. But Nehemiah shows us something more. True urgency is born when leaders are willing to sit honestly before God, name reality without denial, and invite others into discernment rather than control. Only then does change begin, one faithful step at a time.

Prayer /s Ministry

One of the clearest findings in church renewal research is that churches tend to **underestimate prayer even while affirming it**.

In **Anatomy of a Revived Church**, Thomas Rainer notes that when leaders of revitalized churches were first asked what led to renewal, they often pointed to methods, structural changes, or leadership shifts. But when researchers pressed deeper, asking what *preceded* those visible changes, the answer was the same.



“When we dug more deeply... any question that sought to get at least one layer beneath the surface issues yielded the same result. They were preceded and sustained by prayer.”[1]

Even more striking was this repeated observation:

“God has been pleased to turn churches around when only a few people in the church are committed to pray for revitalization.”[2]

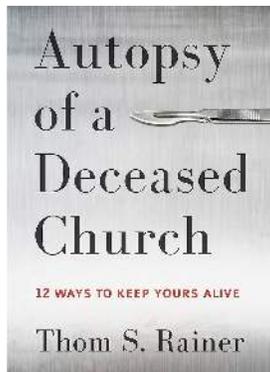
Often just a **small number of persistent, faithful intercessors**.

And Rainer’s concludes:

“Every sustained church revitalization is undergirded by a powerful movement of prayer. Every. Single. One.”[3]

This research reinforces what Nehemiah models: renewal begins when leaders treat prayer not as preparation for ministry, but as ministry itself.

When Prayer Becomes Routine



Rainer’s later work, **Autopsy of a Deceased Church**, provides an interesting counterpoint.

When leaders of churches that had closed or were about to close were asked if they prayed together, the answer was often an

enthusiastic yes.

But when researchers asked *how* they prayed, a different picture emerged.

The prayers were:

- routine
- perfunctory
- brief
- ritualized
- disconnected from discernment and mission

Rainer notes that these prayers bore little resemblance to the prayers of the New Testament church. Prayer and the health of the church go hand in hand. When the church is engaged in meaningful prayer, it becomes both the cause and the result of greater church health.[4] Churches rarely die because they stop praying altogether. They die because prayer becomes **functional instead of formative**.

Prayer and Fasting

One of the first things Scripture highlights about Nehemiah’s prayer is fasting. Fasting is an expression of wholeheartedness.

Joel 2:12 “Even now,” declares the Lord, “return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning.”

How do we know when to pray *and* fast, and when to simply pray? Scripture offers a pattern: **fasting is connected to a deeply troubled spirit or an anxious heart before the Lord.** In a sense, fasting chooses us, because the burden is too heavy to ignore. Nehemiah fasts because the situation matters that much.

The Shape of Nehemiah's Prayer

Nehemiah's prayer in Nehemiah 1:5-11 gives us a pattern for leadership prayer.

1. Praise Comes First

"O Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps his covenant of unfailing love..." (Nehemiah 1:5) Nehemiah begins with God's character. Praise reminds us that while the situation is overwhelming, it is not ultimate.

2. Confession Is Personal

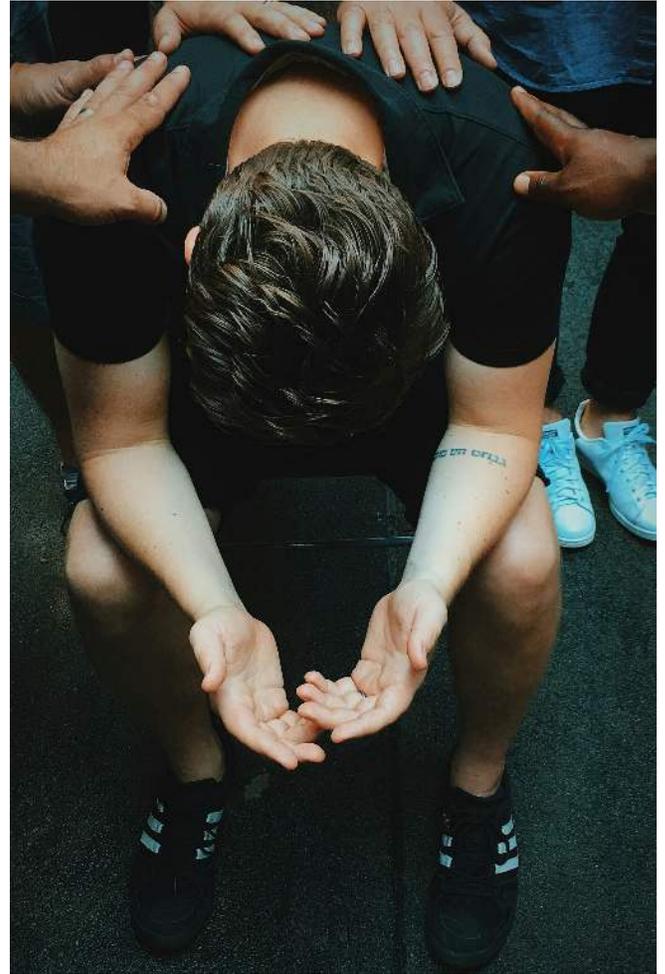
"I confess that we have sinned against you... even my own family and I." (Nehemiah 1:6-7) Nehemiah does not externalize blame. He includes himself.

3. God's Promises Are Claimed

"Please remember what you told your servant Moses..." (Nehemiah 1:8-9) Nehemiah anchors his prayer in God's revealed will, remembering God's promises.

4. The Petition Is Bold

"Grant me success today by making the king favorable to me." (Nehemiah 1:11) Nehemiah prays for success, favour, and access. That kind of prayer may make modern leaders uncomfortable, yet it is biblical.



Prayer has become more essential for me as a leader. This has not always been the case, but it is definitely more so now than it has been. Why?

- **Prayer makes me wait.**
I cannot work and pray at the same time. Prayer forces me to entrust the situation to God.
- **Prayer clears my vision.**
It burns off the fog so I can see more clearly, not just the problem, but God's possibilities.
- **Prayer quiets my heart.**
I cannot worry and pray simultaneously. Prayer replaces anxiety with trust.
- **Prayer activates my faith.**
Prayer inclines me to trust God and sets faith on fire.

Discerning Together

Nehemiah begins alone, but he does not remain alone. Healthy leadership moves from **personal prayer** to **communal discernment**. [The JumpStart](#) process names this explicitly. This practice has been helpful for us as a church to begin to understand God's plan and purpose in understanding the sense of urgency. We have found listening prayer to be very effective.

Practice: Guided Listening Prayer

Each team member prays aloud, asking:

- Where is God already at work in and around us?
- Where might God be calling our church to grow?

After each prayer, the group pauses and names:

- Scriptures
- images or promptings
- repeated themes

This is not brainstorming. It is listening. Patterns often reveal calling.

Field Manual: Put This on Paper

Reflection Space

1. What burden keeps resurfacing in prayer?
2. What Scriptures or promises seem to repeat?
3. Are there shared themes across the group?
4. Is God raising up someone to lead in prayer?

If Nehemiah could pray for God's intervention in political, economic, and cultural realities, then prayer has a place in our work, families, congregations, and public witness. If you are starting something new, begin where Nehemiah began.

Go first to God. Fast if the burden is heavy.

Chapter 2 - Change Never Happens Alone

Build a Guiding Coalition

Nehemiah 2:6-8; 2:16; 3:1-2 (see also 2:11-18) | Kotter Step 2

Making a change in church life is hard, there's just no two ways around it. Motivation gets in the way. Old habits get in the way. Fear gets in the way. Most people prefer what is familiar because it feels safe.

But there's a deeper challenge than motivation: change exposes how alone we are. You can have a burden from God, a clear problem in front of you, and even a direction forming, and still lose momentum because you're carrying it by yourself. That's why Kotter's second step matters so much: **build a guiding coalition**. In other words, find the people who will help you carry the change. Nehemiah shows us what this looks like. He doesn't walk into Jerusalem with a megaphone or call a public meeting. He begins building the guiding coalition so that he has the right people for the work.

Nehemiah's Story

Nehemiah's coalition-building begins in the most unlikely place: the Persian palace. He has been praying for months. Then the king notices his sadness and asks what's wrong. Nehemiah is terrified, because sadness in the king's presence is not a safe emotion to display, yet God has been preparing this moment.

Nehemiah 2:4-5 "The king asked, "Well, how can I help you?" **With a prayer to the God of heaven, 5 I replied,** "If it please the king, and if you are pleased with me, your servant, send me to Judah to rebuild the city where my ancestors are buried."

Nehemiah does two things at once: he prays, and he speaks. He steps forward with a clear next-step plan: permission to go, a defined timeline, and letters for safe passage and resources (Neh. 2:6-8).

Notice what Nehemiah is doing. He is building a coalition with the highest influencer in the system because the mission requires authorization and provision. He asks for letters to regional governors and for a letter to Asaph, keeper of the king's forest, so the materials are secured up front. Then Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem and does something that drives younger leaders a little crazy: he waits. This would've driven me crazy as well. Nehemiah takes three days and then surveys the walls at night with only a few others. He gathers information and begins to form a plan.



Only after that does he begin to widen the circle.

“Not yet” is the key phrase. By the time Nehemiah speaks publicly, his coalition is already in motion. He has credibility with the king, clarity about the problem, and a growing circle of leaders who will help carry the vision. Then chapter 3 begins giving us some insight as to who the new leaders in the coalition are. The high priest and other leaders take their place in the work (Neh. 3:1–2).

Nehemiah 2:16 *“The city officials did not know I had been out there or what I was doing, for I had not yet said anything to anyone about my plans. I had not yet spoken to the Jewish leaders, the priests, the nobles, the officials, or anyone else in the administration.”*



God is the One who changes hearts. You don't force people into the future; you pray them into it. Praying and waiting go hand-in-hand. We want to rush; God often forms the coalition while we wait. Faith is not a synonym for (or a substitute for) careful planning. Faith breeds organization, they go together. He prays until God opens a door. He waits long enough for timing to mature. And when the door opens, he steps through it with a plan, letters, resources, and a sequence of conversations.

This is why 'coalition' isn't just a leadership tactic. It's how God works. God rarely moves a congregation forward through one heroic person. **He raises up a band of builders, different callings, with different strengths.**

Leadership Translation: What is a Guiding Coalition?

A guiding coalition is not the same as a committee. Committees can be helpful, coalitions are different. A coalition is the group of people who carry the change with you, spiritually, relationally, and practically.

A guiding coalition is made up of people who:

- trust God and are trusted by others
- understand the real problem (not just the surface issue)
- have influence in different 'pockets' of the church
- can handle pushback without panic
- will do the work, not just discuss the work

In missional language this is called the **Person Of Peace**. When Jesus sent out the 72 disciples to go ahead of Him, He gave them directions for how to proceed.



Luke 10:5-6 "Whenever you enter someone's home, first say, 'May God's peace be on this house.' If those who live there are peaceful, the blessing will stand; if they are not, the blessing will return to you."

Simply put, a Person of Peace is someone who is prepared to hear the message of the kingdom of God and is open to receiving what you say about moving into a new reality. Someone who is not a Person of Peace doesn't receive what you say. According to Jesus we shouldn't belabour the issue, we are to shake the dust off our feet and move on. We're not supposed to coerce to make someone become a Person of Peace. That's the Holy Spirit's job.

Gathering those individuals into a team provides the guiding coalition with a group that has a godly connection and an openness to change. This group of people become partners together in carrying out the change necessary.

Church change often fails when leaders confuse supporters with partners. Supporters will clap. Partners will carry weight. Supporters agree with the idea. Partners take responsibility for the outcome.

It also fails when coalitions are built on position instead of trust. Titles matter, trust matters more. Nehemiah doesn't only recruit authority; he recruits credibility. That's why priests and leaders are involved early: not to control the people, but to model ownership.

Change also fails when leaders announce a direction before building shared ownership. Announcements are easy. Shared ownership is costly. Nehemiah builds ownership through timing, information, and invitation.

From Solo Burden to Shared Calling

Nehemiah refuses to carry the work alone. This is where Kotter's second step, **building a guiding coalition**, comes alive in the biblical story. Change does not fail because leaders lack vision. Change fails because leaders try to carry the vision by themselves.

In Nehemiah 2, we see a leader who understands that faith is not opposed to planning, and spiritual leadership is not solo heroics. God calls Nehemiah, but God never intends Nehemiah to act alone. **The burden may begin with one person; however the work of renewal always belongs to a community.** Nehemiah builds his coalition in stages. He starts with the king because he needs the authorization and provision. He secures safe passage, resources, and legitimacy. Then he widens the circle to include officials, priests, Levites, and eventually the people themselves.

Too often, churches confuse **announcements with alignment**. We assume that if the pastor or the leadership team stand up front and tell people where we were going often enough people will automatically follow. Nehemiah shows us something different. In leadership terms, a guiding coalition is not just a group of supporters who agree with the idea. It is a group of people who carry responsibility for the work.

In missional language, this coalition functions much like a **Missionary Team made up of People of Peace**. Missionaries are not sent alone. They are prayed for, equipped, resourced, and surrounded by people who share ownership of the calling. In the same way, Nehemiah does not walk into Jerusalem as a lone visionary. He arrives with backing, credibility, and relational capital.

In the context of **JumpStart**, this guiding coalition looks very much like a **pilot project team**.

Building Your Pilot Project Team

In the context of the JumpStart program, the guiding coalition often resembles a pilot project team. This small, dedicated group is essential for turning a vision into a concrete reality. Just as Nehemiah formed a coalition of officials, priests, and community leaders to rebuild Jerusalem's walls, you'll want to gather a team of people who share a passion for the new ministry initiative.

What Does a Pilot Project Team Do?

- **Clarify the Vision:** They help refine and articulate the vision, ensuring it's clear and actionable.
- **Share the Load:** They distribute responsibilities, so no one person carries the entire burden of implementation.
- **Build Momentum:** They create early wins and encourage others to get involved, just like Nehemiah's team focused on visible progress to inspire the community.



Who Should Be on Your Team?

Look for people who:

- Have a heart for the mission and align with your core values.
- Bring diverse gifts and skills to the table, whether it's administrative skills, hospitality, teaching, or creative thinking.
- Are willing to pray, discern, and step out in faith together.

By forming a pilot project team, you're laying the groundwork for sustainable, Spirit-led change, just as Nehemiah did with his guiding coalition. Before a church-wide shift takes place, a smaller group is invited to step into the future first. They test ideas. They pray. They learn. They absorb resistance. They make mistakes. In doing so, they create a safe on-ramp for the rest of the church.

A pilot team does not replace the congregation; it serves the congregation. It carries the early weight so others are not crushed by uncertainty or fear.

Nehemiah surveys the walls at night with only a few others. He gathers information before gathering opinions. He does the emotional and spiritual work before inviting public buy-in. When he finally speaks to the leaders and names the disgrace of Jerusalem, he does so with credibility because he has already done the work.

This also helps explain why opposition shows up so quickly in the story. Sanballat and Tobiah appear almost immediately; it's confirmation that change is actually happening. **Resistance is rarely a sign that something is wrong; more often it is a sign that something meaningful is underway.** A guiding coalition matters here because opposition isolates leaders. When leaders stand alone, criticism feels personal. When leaders stand together, resistance becomes manageable and even clarifying.

Coalitions absorb pressure. They prevent burnout. They keep leaders from confusing criticism with calling. Nehemiah does not respond to opposition by retreating or overexplaining. He stays focused on the work and grounded in the people God has placed around him. The coalition becomes both a spiritual buffer and a practical engine for progress.

For churches that want to move, but are afraid to, this step is often the turning point. You don't begin by convincing everyone. More times than I can count I've had conversations with individuals and pastors who have this belief that in order to move the project forward they have to have most of the people on board. When I explained the idea of the pilot project as a way to test the waters and move things towards the possibility of becoming a majority decision then the pressure's off and the pastors and leaders get excited about the possibility of change. You begin by gathering the right few. You don't start with a vote. When the guiding coalition is formed well, the church discovers that change no longer feels like something being done *to* them, but something being built *with* them.



JumpStart Field Manual: Build Your Coalition

Use the questions below with your council, leadership team, or ministry leaders. If you print this book, leave space to write, because leaders learn by doing.

1) Identify the 'tables' that matter

In Nehemiah's case, there were multiple tables: palace, city leadership, priests, workers.

What are the key tables in our church system (council, staff, ministry leads, legacy influencers, emerging leaders)?

Which table must be engaged early for authorization, protection, or resourcing?

Which table must be engaged early for spiritual credibility?

Notes:

2) Clarify who must be at the table early

Who has trust capital with the congregation?

Who sees the problem clearly and is willing to act?

Who brings calm when things get tense?

Who can translate the change to different groups without spinning it?

Names:

3) Decide who should hear second, not last

Not everyone can be 'first in,' but no one should be treated as invisible. Plan the sequence.

Who will feel bypassed if they hear about this too late?

Who needs a personal conversation before a public conversation?

What is the most honoring path for communication in our context?

Plan:

4) Build the coalition spiritually, not just structurally

Before you ask people to build, ask them to pray.

Suggested practice (15–20 minutes):

Pray: "Lord, give us favor, clarity, and unity for the next step."

Ask: "Who are You raising up to carry this with us?"

Listen: Write down names and themes that repeat.

Prayer notes:

Closing Reflection: Don't Build Alone

Nehemiah didn't rebuild the wall with a speech. He rebuilt it with a coalition. He honored timing. He gathered information. He invited leaders to carry the work visibly. He trusted God to change hearts while he did the next faithful thing.

If you're leading change in a church that wants to move, but is afraid to, your next step may not be another meeting or another announcement. Your next steps may be building the right coalition: a small group of trusted builders who will pray, plan, carry weight, and help the church move forward brick by brick.

Chapter 3 - Vision That People Can Live With

Developing Vision and Strategy *Nehemiah 2:11-18 | Kotter Step 3*

John Kotter's third step in leading change is **Developing a Vision and Strategy**. In his words, this stage clarifies *what* the future will look like and *how* people will get there. Without this step, change efforts tend to stall, not because people are unwilling, but because they cannot see where they are going or how today's sacrifices connect to tomorrow's faithfulness.

When Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem, **he prays, and then he walks**. Nehemiah 2 tells us that he surveys the walls personally, at night, with only a few companions. He does not even disclose the vision God has placed in his heart because he needs more discernment. Nehemiah understands that before a vision can be shared, it must first be understood.

Verse 13 tells us: *Nehemiah 2:13-15 "After dark I went out through the Valley Gate, past the Jackal's Well, and over to the Dung Gate to inspect the broken walls and burned gates. 14 Then I went to the Fountain Gate and to the King's Pool, but my donkey couldn't get through the rubble. 15 So, though it was still dark, I went up the Kidron Valley instead, inspecting the wall before I turned back and entered again at the Valley Gate."*

Nehemiah is not glancing at the problem. He is studying it. He is paying attention to rubble, damage, and vulnerability. Yet, even after this careful inspection, it is clear that Nehemiah does not have a fully developed plan. One walk around the city could not possibly yield every answer. **sufficient information.**

He has enough. Nehemiah does not wait for perfect information. He waits for He gathers what is necessary to formulate a wise, workable strategy, knowing that clarity will come. Only after that process does he speak to the people and root the rebuilding effort in a deeper purpose, so that Jerusalem will no longer live in disgrace and so that God's name will be honoured again among His people.

I have found this to be true not only in Scripture but in lived experience. When we began exploring the possibility of becoming a multisite church, we quickly realized that vision without information would drive some people crazy. At the same time, waiting for every possible answer would have guaranteed paralysis.

As a Design Team (strategic planning team with a cooler name), we had to discern what information was essential, to communicate a faithful and compelling vision.

We began by studying the municipality's growth projections. We looked carefully at population trends in Bowmanville, Courtice, and Newcastle. Communities were growing faster than the church presence within them. Church-to-population ratios were widening, especially in Newcastle, revealing a missional gap that could not be ignored.

This information did not give us every answer about staffing, finances, or long-term sustainability. But it gave us clarity about *why* we needed to act. Like Nehemiah standing amid broken stones, we could now name the reality honestly and prayerfully.

We also learned that vision needed translation. To help people understand what this change would mean, we created a simple vision document that described the current realities of Sunday morning and the projected realities of becoming one church with two sites. It was an attempt to honour people by helping them see both the opportunities and the costs.

William Bridges' insight proved painfully accurate: "Change often fails not because people resist beginnings, but because no one helps them grieve endings." [5] So, we walked through the document with leaders, staff, and elders. We invited questions. We listened carefully, knowing that blind spots are inevitable when leaders are close to a vision. The document also became a tool for those who were hesitant yet open, people who needed time, clarity, and conversation rather than pressure.

Some resisters softened when they could see the strategy. Others did not. That, too, is part of leadership. A vision document cannot convince everyone, but it can create a shared language for discernment and decision-making. Nehemiah understood this. Vision is not simply announcing a destination; it is helping people see reality clearly, trust God deeply, and take the next faithful step together. That is what Kotter's third step demands. That is what Nehemiah models, not by having every answer, but by knowing enough to lead with courage.

Nehemiah. 2:17 "You know very well what trouble were in..."

Vision Begins with Reality

In order to develop a vision for rebuilding the walls, Nehemiah needed to understand the problem as it actually existed, not as it was remembered. This is a critical leadership moment. Vision is not denial. Vision does not ignore damage nor pretend things are better than they are. Vision tells the truth and then invites people into hope. When Nehemiah finally speaks, he begins with words the people already know are true:



That single sentence does more than describe a problem. It names shared experience. It validates what the people have been living with for years: insecurity, economic instability, and public disgrace. Vision works when people recognize themselves in it. If leaders describe a future people cannot see themselves in, it will never gain traction. Nehemiah doesn't start with his idea; he starts with *their reality*. Only then does he point toward a different future:

Nehemiah 2:17 "...Let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem and end this disgrace!"

Notice what he does not say. He does not promise ease or minimize effort. He does not oversell outcomes. He names the problem, invites participation, and connects the work to restored identity.

When I began the work of starting Discovery Church in 2004, casting vision was not an abstract exercise, it was deeply practical, relational, and often uncomfortable. There were many evenings spent sitting across tables from people, living rooms, kitchens, coffee shops, church fellowship halls, opening my notebook and talking honestly about what a new church in our community might look like.

I came prepared. I began with the call of the gospel to go and make disciples. I shared studies that church plants are most effective in drawing new people to Christ. I had demographic information from the city that showed a growing population and a real need for another church, even though there were already Christian Reformed congregations in town at the time.

I came with the blessing of our denomination. I came with the support of our mother church, Rehoboth CRC. On paper, the vision made sense.

Vision does not become real on paper. It becomes real when people are asked to step into it. Every time I cast vision for the church plant, I was clear that participation came with expectations. I told people that if they chose to be part of this new work, it would require a shift in their financial giving, from their church to the church plant.

I was honest about the expectation of tithing, about giving ten percent as an act of worship and trust. I talked openly about time, asking people to consider two to five hours a week invested in the life of the church.

And I made it clear that participation meant more than attending services, it meant being involved in the community and in evangelistic efforts beyond the walls of the church. I didn't promise an easy path. I didn't pretend that this would fit neatly into already busy lives.

Some people pushed back, especially on the time commitment. Two to five hours a week felt like too much. Others struggled with the idea of being involved in activities that didn't look like "church" as they had known it. That resistance was important it revealed where reality met vision.

So, I gave concrete examples. I told people that those two to five hours didn't have to be another meeting in a church building. It could be golfing with a friend and sharing your faith story naturally over time. It could be coaching soccer and intentionally building relationships with parents on the sidelines.

It could be showing up for servant evangelism in the city, helping, serving, listening, being present. It could be choosing to hang out with people who might never set foot in a church unless someone they trusted invited them.

That experience shaped how I understand vision casting to this day. Vision is not about painting an ideal future and hoping people will follow. Vision begins with an honest look at where we are, what it will cost to move forward, and whether we are willing to align our lives, not just our words, with what God is calling us to build.

That is exactly what Nehemiah does. He does not hide the rubble. He does not minimize the work. **He names the trouble honestly and invites people into a shared, costly, hopeful future.**

Vision Is Clarity with Hope

One of the most important lessons is that vision is not a foggy picture of the future. It is **clarity with hope**. Clarity is based upon reality, facts, locations, people, skills and resources whereas hope deals with spiritual matters, aspirations and intentions. I've said before that I think vision is half fact and half fiction but is definitely more than that. Vision is based in reality with a hopeful future with identifiable next steps.

In leadership terms, vision unfolds in three movements:

1. **Information** – understanding what is actually happening
2. **Concepts** – forming a coherent picture of what could be
3. **Implementation** – identifying the next faithful steps

Nehemiah follows this pattern intuitively. He gathers information by surveying the walls himself. He forms a concept by connecting restoration to dignity and obedience to God. He moves toward implementation by inviting leaders and people into shared work. This is where Nehemiah's leadership aligns closely with what John Kotter describes in *Leading Change*. Vision and strategy are not abstract ideas; **they are the means by which people understand why change is necessary and how it will unfold**. Nehemiah does not present a detailed project plan at this point. He offers something more important: **direction**. The details will come. Direction must come first.

Vision, Coalition, and Strategy Belong Together

Vision does not stand alone, it is carried by people. Nehemiah immediately links vision to a guiding coalition, officials, nobles, priests, and Levites. These leaders serve as visible role models. The high priest begins the rebuilding work. Priests and Levites take up sections of the wall. Leadership becomes embodied, not theoretical. This is where vision becomes believable.

In church settings today, this often happens through **pilot project teams**, small groups who step into the future first. They absorb uncertainty, work through resistance, and demonstrate what obedience looks like before the whole church is asked to move. Vision spreads when people can see it lived.

From Vision to Action

As the work begins, Nehemiah will face opposition, injustice, fatigue, and fear. He responded with prayer, strategy, and courage. He removed obstacles, address internal breakdowns, and created visible progress that kept hope alive.

All of that flows from this moment. **Nehemiah is a leader who understands the problem who comes with a vision that names reality and offers hope and a strategy that invites shared ownership.** In other words, if you want to accomplish a vision, there must be a way to execute a behaviour-changing strategy. As Carry Nieuwhof aptly puts it, “a B+ strategy well executed trumps an A+ vision every time.”[\[6\]](#)

In the journey of leading change, whether we look at Nehemiah’s leadership or our own church’s path, this reminder helps us keep our focus on practical and actionable steps rather than just idealistic goals. Nehemiah’s vision does not end with walls. It leads to renewed worship, recommitment to God’s Word, and restored identity as God’s people.

JumpStart Leadership Application

Take time to work through these questions with your leadership team or pilot project group.

Vision Clarity

- Can we articulate our vision in one clear sentence?
- Does it name reality honestly?
- Does it point toward hope without overselling ease?

Strategic Alignment

- Does our strategy reduce fear, or unintentionally create it?
- Have we connected the vision to concrete next steps?
- Who is already living this vision visibly?

Shared Ownership

- Who is carrying this vision with us, not just supporting it?
- Where can we create early, visible signs of progress?

Leave space to write. Vision grows clearer when leaders slow down long enough to listen, pray, and name what God is already stirring.

Chapter 4 - Communicating the Vision for Change

Making the Vision Visible, Credible, and Shared

Nehemiah 3 | Kotter Step 4

In Step 4 of his change framework, Kotter argues that leaders must **communicate the change vision repeatedly, consistently, and visibly**. Not just through speeches or meetings, but through actions, structures, and who is seen leading the work. Vision leaks, like holes in a bucket, if it is only talked about. It gains traction when people can *see it lived out*.

Once the vision for rebuilding the wall has been cast, Nehemiah does not retreat into strategy sessions or endless explanations. Instead, he communicates the vision by **who he puts to work first** and **where he places them**. The vision is no longer just words; it becomes embodied leadership.

Before Nehemiah ever assigns a single person to a section of the wall, something happens that I think is a *genius idea*. Honestly, this is one of the reasons I get so excited about Nehemiah chapter 3. I know, on the surface it looks like a long list of names, gates, and construction details. Yet every time I read it, I find myself thinking, *this is brilliant*. This is where the vision stops being theoretical and starts becoming shared.

This is where leadership turns into movement. **Just look at the examples below** and see how Nehemiah was able to recruit different kinds of people from different places who had connections and influence beyond what he could ever gather together himself. They were recruited and then they recruited others.

Nehemiah 3:1 *Then Eliashib the high priest and the other priests started to rebuild at the Sheep Gate. They dedicated it and set up its doors, building the wall as far as the Tower of the Hundred, which they dedicated, and the Tower of Hananel.*

Nehemiah 3:2 *People from the town of Jericho worked next to them, and beyond them was Zaccur son of Imri.*

Nehemiah 3:3 *The Fish Gate was built by the sons of Hassenaah. They laid the beams, set up its doors, and installed its bolts and bars.*

Nehemiah 3:8 *Uzziel son of Harhaiah, a goldsmith by trade, worked next to him, and Hananiah, a manufacturer of perfumes, worked next to him. They restored Jerusalem as far as the Broad Wall.*

Nehemiah 3:10 *Next was Jedaiah son of Harumaph, who rebuilt the wall across from his own house.*

Nehemiah 3:12 *Shallum son of Hallohesh, ruler of half the district of Jerusalem, was next to them, helping with the work along with his daughters.*

Nehemiah 3:13 *The Valley Gate was rebuilt by Hanun and the people of Zanoah. They repaired it and installed its doors, bolts, and bars. They also repaired 1,500 feet of the wall to the Dung Gate.*

Nehemiah 3:15 *The Fountain Gate was repaired by Shallun son of Col-Hozeh, ruler of the Mizpah district. He rebuilt it, roofed it, and installed its doors, bolts, and bars.*

Nehemiah 3:17 *Next were the Levites, led by Rehum son of Bani.*

Nehemiah 3:20 *Next was Baruch son of Zabbai, who zealously repaired another section, from the angle to the doorway of the house of Eliashib the high priest.*

Nehemiah 3:21 *Next to him was Meremoth son of Uriah, grandson of Hakkoz, who repaired another section from the doorway of Eliashib's house to the end of the house.*

Nehemiah 3:23 *Benjamin and Hasshub rebuilt the wall across from their house.*

Nehemiah 3:28 *Above the Horse Gate, the priests repaired the wall, each one across from his own house.*

Nehemiah 3:29 *Next was Zadok son of Immer, who rebuilt the wall across from his own house.*

Nehemiah 3:30 *Next was Meshullam son of Berekiah, who rebuilt the wall across from where he lived.*

I love this so much because it's leadership at its most practical. Nehemiah doesn't wait for buy-in from everyone before he starts. He starts with willing leaders. Momentum follows participation. Chapter 3 is not filler. It's the moment where vision becomes visible. It's brilliant in its simplicity. Nehemiah shows us that lasting change doesn't begin with perfect plans or universal agreement, it begins when a small group of committed leaders who step forward and say, *We're in*. Once that happens, the wall starts rising, one brick at a time.

Nehemiah doesn't try to carry the vision by himself. He doesn't stand on a pile of rubble, point dramatically, and hope everyone else figures it out. Instead, he enlists real people to begin the work alongside him. Officials, nobles, priests, Levites, **and most importantly, the high priest himself**. When the people saw their spiritual leaders picking up stones and getting their hands dirty, the vision didn't need a marketing campaign. It was already being preached through action. Here's the genius part. **Nehemiah understands that culture changes faster when the right people move first**. So, he doesn't just recruit volunteers; he builds a guiding coalition. These are people with influence, credibility, and visibility. When the high priest starts rebuilding a gate, it sends a message far louder than any speech Nehemiah could give.

I have seen the same principle at work in the life of our own church. One of the most effective ways we made vision visible was not through another sermon or document, but by inviting a small group of people to live it first. We wanted reproducible discipleship to be a cornerstone of our vision and strategy and one of the ways we wanted to live that out was by starting something called Discipleship Huddles.

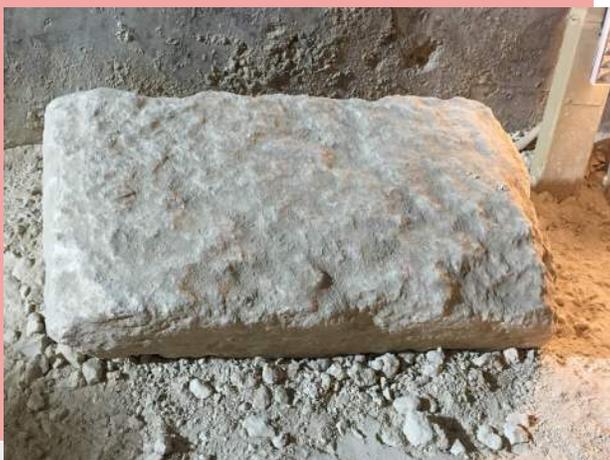
The expectation was simple and clear: if you were part of a huddle, you were not just there to grow personally, you were there to start something. That “something” did not have to be a formal program. It could be a relational network, a one-on-one discipleship relationship, or a new ministry expression that fit your gifts and context. The goal was not scale. The goal was multiplication. Out of one huddle of eight people, three new groups emerged organically. One group of women began meeting regularly for exercise and connection through a walking club. Another group of parents started a simple moms-and-tots gathering called *Tea and Tots*, creating space for relationship and faith conversations with young families. A third group of young adults formed a new ministry called *The Hub*, focused on community, faith, and leadership development. None of these groups were centrally planned. They were born out of people who had caught the vision and began acting on it. That’s what it looks like to communicate vision through participation. We trusted the Spirit to work through willing leaders.

Those early participants became a guiding coalition, not because they held a title, but because they modeled what faithfulness looked like. When people can see others doing the work, the vision becomes believable. When they see ordinary people starting ordinary things with faith and intentionality, they begin to imagine what it might look like in their own lives. Vision stops being abstract and starts becoming shared.

In moments of change, people watch leaders more closely than they listen to them. Nehemiah knows that if the vision is going to hold, it must be carried by trusted people who are willing to embody it publicly. After Nehemiah calls the leaders and names the disgrace of Jerusalem, he enlists the guiding coalition and puts the vision into motion. Officials, nobles, priests, and Levites are not merely informed of the plan; they are drawn directly into the work itself. Communication moves from words to action. One of the most significant leadership decisions Nehemiah makes is placing the high priest at the very front of the rebuilding effort. Nehemiah 3 opens with the high priest and his fellow priests rebuilding the Sheep Gate. In a community shaped by worship and religious authority, the high priest serves as a powerful role model. When he picks up tools and begins rebuilding, the people understand that this work is not optional, political, or peripheral, it is faithful obedience.

A Conversation along the wall

You can almost hear the conversations taking place along the wall. Some people would have worked with quiet determination, saying to a neighbour, “It feels good to finally fix what’s been broken for so long. At least this section will be secure.” Others would have worked with folded arms and cautious hearts, muttering, “I’m not sure this will last. We’ve tried before. Sanballat will shut this down like he always does.” There would have been families arguing over whether the effort was worth the risk, priests reminding the people that this work was an act of faithfulness, and skeptics watching closely to see if the leaders would quit when resistance came.



Then there was the sight that changed the conversation entirely, the high priest working at the Sheep Gate, Levites setting stones alongside merchants and families, spiritual leaders doing manual labour in plain view of everyone. As stones were set and gates began to rise, something shifted. The arguments grew quieter. The questions changed tone.

People who doubted the plan still showed up, because their section of wall was right outside their home. It was no longer Nehemiah's idea, it was their wall, their safety, their future. Doing it together is not just more efficient; it is formational. **Shared work builds shared belief.** Momentum grows when people can see progress with their own eyes. Nehemiah understands the power of visible wins. Gates are repaired. Sections are completed. People can point and say, "That part is finished." These short-term wins reinforce the vision without requiring another speech. Communication is happening constantly, through progress. Sermons inspire, but systems sustain. Nehemiah embeds the vision into the daily rhythms of the city. Every rebuilt section becomes a message. Every completed gate becomes a reminder that the work matters and that God is with them. In leadership terms, Nehemiah is reducing anxiety by increasing clarity. People know what is expected. They know where they fit. They can see that the work is making a difference. That kind of communication lowers resistance and builds confidence.

For churches navigating change, this principle is essential. Vision does not stick because it is well worded. It sticks because it is reinforced through modeling, structure, and visible progress. When leaders participate visibly, people listen more carefully. When progress can be seen, hope grows.

This is also why **pilot project teams** are so effective in congregational change. They allow people to see the future before being asked to embrace it fully. They create living examples of what the vision looks like in practice. Communication happens when people can say, "I've seen that," or "I know someone involved," or "That actually seems possible." As the wall rises section by section, the vision is repeated. The people are reminded daily why they are doing this work and what obedience looks like right now.

For leaders using this book as a field guide, the application is practical and immediate.

JumpStart Application

Take time to work through these questions with your leadership team, council, or pilot project group. Leave space to write. This work cannot be rushed.

1. Where can people in our church see progress quickly?
2. Which parts of our vision can be embodied rather than explained?
3. Who are the trusted role models whose participation would communicate more than another announcement?
4. What small wins need to be celebrated publicly, not to inflate ego, but to reinforce hope?
5. How are we communicating the vision through structure, rhythm, and participation, not just words?

Vision does not need constant reinvention. It needs consistent reinforcement.

Nehemiah communicates the vision again and again, not by repeating himself, but by structuring the work so the vision is impossible to miss.

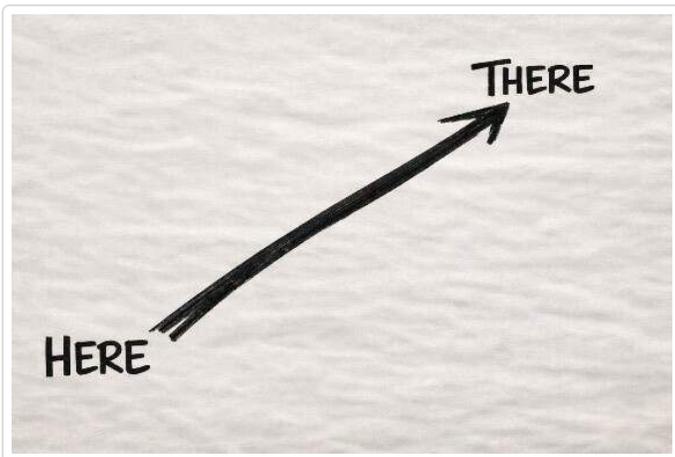
Chapter 5 - Empowering Broad-Based Action

Clearing the Rubble, Equipping the Workers *Nehemiah 4 | Kotter Step 5*

Kotter describes this stage of change as **empowering broad-based action**. In practice, this means removing obstacles, both external and internal, that prevent people from fully participating in the work. In Nehemiah 4, the work is underway, the wall is rising, and the change is no longer theoretical. This is where leadership becomes costly. This is also where a lot of people get stuck: **not at the beginning, but in the middle**. The middle is where discouragement settles in and criticism starts speaking louder than calling. "All change is hard at first, messy in the middle and gorgeous at the end."^[7]

From Here to There

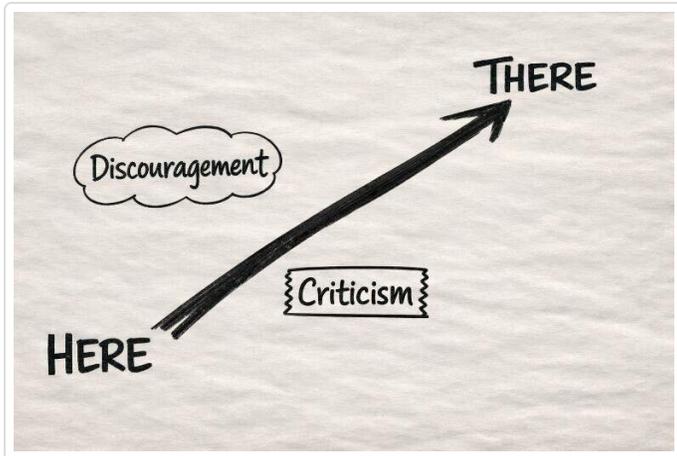
I want to spend some time talking about what it means to move from where you are, "**here**" to the "**there**" where God is calling you to. A move from **here to there** requires a commitment. A choice.



In previous chapters, the emphasis has been on how powerful that one choice is. Maybe there is a situation in your family where you look at the family dynamic and say, "It's got to change. I've got to go from here to there." You must choose to do it. Maybe you are in an employment situation where you think, "I can't stay in this job anymore. I've got to move from this job to that job." Maybe it's your own personal discipleship journey where you are asking the question, "God, what do you have for me?" Maybe that is where you are now. You feel stuck in your spiritual life. You feel stuck in where you are emotionally in a relationship. You've got to move from here to there.

Remember change is not meant to be done alone. Saying it out loud is important. Naming it in front of others is important. Bringing people along is important.

Nehemiah shows something else that is even more foundational: before anything else, **he goes first to prayer**. And he does it over and over and over again. Before he even gets started, "I'm going to pray. I'm going to get started with prayer. Then I'm going to do something. When I come across a problem, first I'm going to pray. Then I'm going to do something."



The hardest part, the most difficult part, is the middle and here's why: Because we get discouraged and there are critics.

When you decide to make a change, when you finally get serious and get down on your knees before God and say, "Lord, I'm going to do this for You", there is almost always a moment where things get harder, not easier. The middle is where many good intentions stall out because discouragement and criticism show up right on schedule.

The Hardest Part of Change Is the Middle

Now, when you make a decision to move, when you make a decision to go from **here** to **there**, the hardest part is not the beginning. The hardest part is the middle. It's possible to stand at the beginning and say, "I've got to change. Things have got to happen. I've been put in a place of leadership, and I've got to move everybody from here to there." That front end can be energizing. You can go to a conference. You can listen to a sermon. You can read a book and be so excited about it. You can tell a few people. You can get down on your knees and pray.

This is where the book of Nehemiah stops being inspirational and starts being painfully practical. This is where leadership collides with real life. Sometimes it's a family member who means well but says, "Are you sure this is wise?" Sometimes it's someone in the church who liked things the way they were and quietly wonders why you had to mess with a good thing. **Some people don't actually oppose change. They oppose inconvenience. The two just happen to look identical.**

I've seen this happen so many times in churches. Someone steps up and says, "We need to change how we're discipling people." Or "We can't keep doing ministry the same way and expect different results." Heads nod, at first. As soon as priorities change, as soon as schedules shift, as soon as familiar patterns are disrupted, the resistance starts to surface. "Why are we doing this?" "Who decided this?" "This doesn't feel like us anymore." Then comes the moment every leader dreads, the trial in the middle of the journey.

Attendance dips. A key volunteer steps away. A new initiative doesn't work the way you hoped. Almost inevitably, someone says the words out loud that everyone else is thinking: "I told you so." That's the moment Nehemiah is standing in. The work has begun, but it's not finished. The vision is clear, but the cost is becoming real. The temptation, for Nehemiah, and for us, is to wonder whether obedience was worth it after all. And in Nehemiah 4, the text shows how he deals with criticism and what he does when the discouragement sets in.

Criticism (External obstacle: resistance, ridicule, intimidation)

Critics rarely show up at the beginning. They tend to appear right about the time something starts working. Sanballat is not new in the story. He shows up earlier. He is the guy who mocks Nehemiah for what he is doing. Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem become thorns in Nehemiah's side and here they are again.

Nehemiah 4:1 "Sanballat was very angry when he learned that we were rebuilding the wall. He flew into a rage, and he mocked the Jews."

The work is getting going. They are probably a quarter, maybe a third of the way through the process. The gates are going up. And Sanballat, outside the city, begins to get angry and begins mocking. He has power and influence over this group of people. The criticisms start to come. "Stop what you're doing," he implies. "I'm getting angry about this." Many of the Jews owe him their farms, and some of their family are in bond slavery to him. He is not happy about the wall being rebuilt.

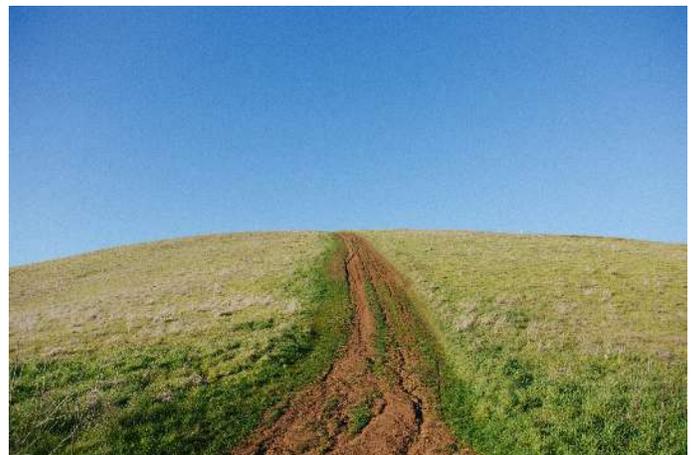
Imagine the pressure: you have leveraged yourself economically to this man and his cronies. If he stands up and says stop, most of the people in Jerusalem are afraid. Then he goes on, in front of his friends and the army officers:

Nehemiah 4:2 "What does this bunch of poor, feeble Jews think they're doing? Do they think that they can build a wall in a single day by just offering a few sacrifices? Do they actually think that they can make something of stones from a rubbish heap, charred ones at that?"

Opposition doesn't just show up as disagreement. It shows up as ridicule, intimidation and as psychological pressure. When opposition arises, leadership has to deal with the criticism. There may be a kind of criticism that is healthy. That is not what Nehemiah 4 is about. Nehemiah 4 is about critics trying to stop what God is doing. Now someone like Sanballat comes along with his friends and starts criticizing. The leaders need to hear this clearly: You can criticize the journey. You can criticize the way the work gets done. You can criticize how someone is trying to get from here to there. However, don't mess with what God has put in your heart and confirmed by God's people through discernment.

I remember John Maxwell said at a Leadership Summit, **"Anything worth doing is uphill."**

- In marriage it's uphill.
- In discipleship it's uphill.
- In leadership it's uphill.
- In church renewal it's uphill.



It takes work. It takes planning. It takes strategy. When criticism comes, the easiest move is back downhill, back to what was. So why bother? Because, **anything worth doing is uphill**. It's been my experience that in the struggle, dealing with the criticisms and the discouragement actually make the end result more satisfying and it shapes anyone involved in the process.

A poet wrote this: "Of all the words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these: it might have been."

I think some of the saddest words in the church are these: "We've always done it this way."

Nehemiah has to deal with the criticism. Then Tobiah piles on:

Nehemiah 4:3: "Tobiah the Ammonite, who was standing beside him, remarked, "That stone wall would collapse if even a fox walked on top of it."

Now the critic recruits. Sanballat recruits Tobiah. This is what critics do. When they criticize, they say, "Stop what you're doing," or "I told you so." If they cannot get you to stop, they recruit others. Then they come and say, "A lot of people are saying," or "A few of us think." Critics try to gain momentum to keep you from doing what God is asking you to do. Now, there is value in criticism. That is not what this text is addressing. This text is addressing those voices that say: "Even though you think this is what God wants, I don't think you should do it." So, what does Nehemiah do? He does what he always does first. **He prays.**

Nehemiah's First Response to Criticism is Prayer

Nehemiah's first answer to criticism is prayer. The first thing you and I need to do when someone criticizes us is pray! The natural tendency is to react. The natural tendency is to dream up all the things you wish you could say. Nehemiah probably wanted to run out there and punch Sanballat right in the nose. And honestly, it would be understandable reaction. This is a huge project. If Nehemiah is not convinced this is what God wants, Sanballat could sabotage it.

God wants leaders to pray. Why? Because Scripture teaches that when you don't know what to do, when you don't know how to respond, pray. Ask for wisdom, and God says He will give it. Allow God time and space to lead you through toward the goal again.

Nehemiah prays: *Nehemiah 4:4-5 "Hear us, our God, for we are being mocked. May their scoffing fall back on their own heads, and may they themselves become captives in a foreign land. Do not ignore their guilt. Do not blot out their sins, for they have provoked you to anger here in front of the builders."*

That is not a polite prayer. "Don't blot out their sin. Don't ignore their guilt." He is pouring out his heart. God is big enough to handle honest angry prayers. God is big enough to allow you the space to get on your knees when criticism comes, pour out your heart, and allow Him to sort you out. **God can handle any complaint that you bring to Him, but it crosses a line when we complain about Him.**

If this is a God-sized vision, if God has put something in your heart, and you are obedient to pursue it, then those critics need to be careful! God says to Abraham in Genesis 12: "I want to bless you... and those who bless you I will bless, and those who curse you I will curse." Sometimes God will put people in their place.

I once heard a story from a fellow pastor that has stayed with me because it forced me to think more deeply about criticism, resistance, and what it means to stand in the way of something God may be doing. A friend of mine accepted a new call to a congregation that openly acknowledged it needed to change.

The church had plateaued and began to decline, energy was low, and there was a shared sense, at least on paper, that the future could not look like the past. When he arrived, he did what many pastors do in those first months: he listened carefully, built relationships, and worked with leadership to begin implementing some early steps toward a renewed vision. Almost immediately, resistance surfaced. The pushback came primarily from members of an older generation who were deeply invested in how things had always been done. They were founding members and under their leadership the church had grown dramatically but in the last 15 years the decline was obvious. Their objections were familiar: *this isn't who we are, this isn't what we've done before, this doesn't feel right.*

What troubled my friend was not disagreement itself, leaders expect that, but the intensity and persistence of the opposition. Over time, he discovered something more concerning.

A small group had begun meeting regularly at a local Tim Hortons coffee shop. It wasn't an official committee. It had no mandate but it functioned as a kind of shadow council, critiquing decisions, questioning motives, and quietly organizing resistance to the changes being made. They were not speaking directly to leadership. They were speaking *around* leadership.

Eventually, my friend identified who was involved. After much prayer and discernment, he decided to approach one of the individuals directly. He asked, "Have you thought about the consequences of what you're doing?"

The person was taken aback, and my friend continued: "If this truly is a vision God has inspired, if this direction is not about preference but obedience, what do you think it means to consistently stand in the way of it? How do you think God responds when someone becomes a roadblock to what He is trying to accomplish?"

The individual dismissed the concern and continued to oppose the changes. At a later point, in a moment that still makes me pause, my friend pressed the question further. He said, "Do you ever wonder if God might remove obstacles in ways we don't expect? Do you ever consider that resisting God's work might come at a cost, maybe even one as serious as being **taken home early to heaven** so that the work can continue?"

When I first heard this story, I laughed and then I felt uncomfortable. The longer I reflected on it, the more it forced me back into Scripture, and back into Nehemiah. He seems to understand something we are often reluctant to name: **when God initiates a vision, He is deeply invested in its completion.** There are times when resistance is necessary and even faithful. There are also moments when opposing the work is no longer about wisdom or caution. It becomes obstruction.

Nehemiah's response to criticism is telling. He does not argue. He does not negotiate with mockery. He does not assemble counter-campaigns. **He prays, and then he keeps building.** Implicitly, he trusts that God will deal with opposition in His own way and in His own time. **God takes His purposes seriously. Leaders, especially those navigating change, must learn to entrust both the vision *and* the resistance to Him.**

This is why Nehemiah's first response is prayer. And then what? Does he arm the people and go to war? Does he go after Sanballat and Tobiah? No. He goes back to work.

*Nehemiah 4:6: "At last the wall was completed to half its height around the entire city, for **the people had worked with enthusiasm.**"*

He prayed in the midst of criticism and **got the people focused back on the goal.** That's what a great leader does. If you are leading a group of people, your family, your workplace, your friends, if you are trying to be a change agent and you receive criticism in the midst of the journey, get them focused back on the goal. Stay focused on what God can do through you. Yes, adjustments may be needed along the way, the leader keeps the people anchored to the calling.

Escalation: Threat and Confusion

Nehemiah 4:7-9: "But when Sanballat and Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites heard that the work was going ahead and that the gaps in the wall of Jerusalem were being repaired, they were furious. They made plans to come and fight against Jerusalem and throw us into confusion. **But we prayed to our God and guarded the city day and night to protect ourselves.**"

Here again: more criticism, more threat, **and Nehemiah begins with prayer again.** The job is to get back on your knees and pray before God that you complete your goal. Nehemiah shows again and again and again: if you are going to get from here to there, you have to get on your knees and then roll up your sleeves. **He prays, and he guards.**

This is Kotter Step 5 in Nehemiah's language: remove obstacles that prevent participation. External obstacles include intimidation, threats, and confusion. Nehemiah counters them with prayer and practical protection. Then the internal obstacle rises.

Discouragement. (*Internal obstacle: fatigue, rubble, loss of confidence*)

Nehemiah 4:10 Then the people begin to complain: "The workers are getting tired, and there's so much rubble to be removed. We will never be able to build the wall by ourselves."

Discouragement sets in. They are halfway through. They can see the rubble. They are tired. This happens to every leader. When you decide to go from here to there, you get halfway through and look at the mess and say, "Is this really worth it?" This is why the middle is always the hardest part.

I've learned this the hard way through renovations. I actually enjoy them. I like demolition. I like making a mess, tearing things apart, and imagining what something *could* become. There's energy in the beginning, walls coming down, plans taking shape, progress you can see right away.

My wife, on the other hand, doesn't like the mess. She loves the end result and even helping along the way, but she hates the dust, the dirt, the noise, and the feeling that nothing is settled. You get halfway through the project, and the excitement is gone. You're tired. You start realizing how many details you forgot about. The list gets longer instead of shorter. The timeline for completion is now out the window. The house feels more chaotic than it did before you started. Eventually she looks at me and asks the honest question everyone is thinking: "When will this all be over?"

That question captures the middle perfectly. Things have to get messier before they get better. The beginning felt decisive. The ending still feels far away. Right here, in the middle, you're tempted to quit, to pause indefinitely, or to settle for something unfinished simply because you're exhausted. This is the moment when many good projects stall. It's the same in your life. The first few days are exciting. The first few weeks are good. Then you get tired. So, what does Nehemiah do? He stations families together. He reminds them of the Lord. He gets them back to work.

Nehemiah 4:14 "Don't be afraid of the enemy. Remember the Lord, who is great and glorious, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes."

Don't do it alone. You need people. You need community. You need a rallying point.

Nehemiah 4:20 When you hear the blast of the trumpet, rush to wherever it is sounding. Then our God will fight for us!"

Nehemiah says, "Our God will fight for us." That phrase, "**Our God will fight for us**", sounds a little different in the life of the church. It's less about battle language and more about *where we place our confidence when the work feels overwhelming*. In today's church, "**Our God will fight for us**" sounds like this:

It sounds like a leader standing up in a moment of fatigue and saying, "This work doesn't rise or fall on our energy alone." It's a reminder that the mission of God was never sustained by human strength, charisma, or perfect systems. God is already at work ahead of us, around us, and within us, even when progress feels slow.

It sounds like refusing to let discouragement become the loudest voice in the room.

When attendance dips, volunteers burn out, finances feel tight, or momentum stalls, "*Our God will fight for us*" means we don't default to panic, blame, or retreat. We pray. We listen. We stay faithful to what God has asked us to do next, not everything, just the next step.

It sounds like courage without bravado. Not, "*We've got this,*" but "*God has us.*" Not, "*If we just work harder,*" but "*If we remain obedient.*" It's the confidence that obedience matters more than outcomes, and faithfulness matters more than optics.

It sounds like leaders calling people back to purpose. Back to why the ministry began. Back to the people God has placed in front of us. Back to the reminder that the church is not built on personalities or programs, but on Christ Himself. Because discouragement thrives in silence. Faith grows when leaders say, *“God has not abandoned this work.”* That’s still the leader’s job in discouragement: To name reality honestly, to gather people together intentionally, and to remind them, again and again, that **the work belongs to God more than it belongs to us.**

When God’s People Become the Obstacle

Not all discouragement comes from the outside. In Nehemiah’s story, opposition doesn’t only come from enemies beyond the wall. It also comes from within the community itself. In many ways, this kind of discouragement is harder to face, because it involves God’s own people. It’s the anguished voices of families who are being crushed by debt.

Nehemiah 5:1-5 About this time some of the men and their wives raised a cry of protest against their fellow Jews. 2 They were saying, “We have such large families. We need more food to survive.” 3 Others said, “We have mortgaged our fields, vineyards, and homes to get food during the famine.” 4 And others said, “We have had to borrow money on our fields and vineyards to pay our taxes. 5 We belong to the same family as those who are wealthy, and our children are just like theirs. Yet we must sell our children into slavery just to get enough money to live. We have already sold some of our daughters, and we are helpless to do anything about it, for our fields and vineyards are already mortgaged to others.”

What makes this moment so devastating is not just the injustice, but who is responsible for it. The oppression is coming from the nobles and officials. From leaders. From insiders. From people who should have known better. Nehemiah tells us that when he hears the cries of the people, *he becomes furious.* He stops the work. He reflects. Then he confronts the leaders directly.

“You are charging your own people interest.” God had been clear about this generations earlier:

Exodus 22:25 “If you lend money to any of my people who are poor among you, you shall not be like a moneylender to him, and you shall not exact interest from him”.

Leviticus 25:36 “Do not take interest or any profit from them, but fear your God, so that they may continue to live among you”.

What these nobles are doing is a direct violation of covenant faithfulness. Nehemiah knows this. These leaders are benefiting personally from the suffering of the very people they are meant to protect. Families are mortgaging their land. Children are being sold into debt slavery. All of it is happening under the leadership of people entrusted with the spiritual and civic well-being of the community. **This moment exposes a dangerous tension.** Nehemiah is leading God’s people forward, rebuilding what was broken, restoring dignity, renewing hope. And yet, beneath the visible progress of the wall, the internal culture is collapsing. Unity is eroding. Trust is breaking down. Faith is being hollowed out from the inside. **You cannot build God’s future on practices God has already condemned.** No amount of external progress can compensate for internal injustice.

This is discouragement in its most dangerous form: when the vision is undermined by the people who are supposed to be carrying it. Nehemiah refuses to ignore it. He names the injustice. He demands restitution. He holds leaders accountable and the leaders fall silent, because they know he is right.

We recognize this in our own lives. Discouragement creeps in when we are trying to move forward faithfully, but unresolved issues keep pulling us backward. A marriage strained because forgiveness has been postponed too long. Family systems where guilt or control resurfaces just as change begins. Financial pressure that makes generosity feel risky again. You start wondering, *What's the point of moving forward if this never really changes?*

The same dynamic appears in the church. Internal discouragement shows up when ministries compete instead of collaborating. When leaders protect turf rather than people. When systems exhaust volunteers instead of equipping them. When financial or organizational practices are technically acceptable but spiritually unhealthy. When the mission sounds right, but the lived culture doesn't match it. It's discouraging when renewal is preached but people still feel unheard or when trust is thin. It's discouraging when leaders say the right things but seem disconnected from the cost others are paying. Nehemiah shows us that discouragement doesn't always mean the vision is wrong. Sometimes it means the vision is right, and something inside the system must be confronted before it collapses under its own weight.

Nehemiah refuses to build a wall at the expense of justice. He refuses to call something "God's work" if it harms God's people. By addressing internal injustice directly, he removes one of the greatest obstacles to sustained change. **Discouragement doesn't lift when problems are ignored. It lifts when integrity is restored.** Sometimes the most faithful thing a leader can do in the middle of the work is to stop building for a moment, so that what is being built can last.

Bringing It Back to Kotter - Empowering Broad-Based Action

Change always threatens someone. Kotter describes this stage as empowering broad-based action. In practice, that means removing obstacles, both external and internal, that prevent people from fully participating in the work.

Empowering broad-based action requires more than removing external threats. It also requires addressing discouragement within the community. Because discouragement will stop a vision faster than criticism ever will, if leaders allow people to drift into isolation, fatigue, and hopelessness. Nehemiah refuses that drift. He creates togetherness. He restores courage. He keeps the work moving.

JumpStart Application

(Space to work, printable field manual questions)

Use the questions below with your council, leadership team, pilot project group, or key ministry leaders. Don't rush these. Discouragement and criticism often lose power simply by being named honestly.

1) Naming the middle:

Where are we right now on the "here to there" journey, beginning, middle, or nearing completion? What evidence supports that?

2) Criticism inventory:

What criticism are we currently facing?

- Is it constructive counsel we should listen to?
- Or corrosive criticism meant to stop obedience?

3) Reaction vs. prayer:

When criticism hits, what is our default response, reactive or prayerful? What would it look like to "go first to prayer" as a leadership team?

4) External obstacles:

What external obstacles are creating fear, confusion, or pressure right now (opposition, uncertainty, conflict, threats, instability, misinformation)? What practical guardrails or protections are needed?

5) Internal obstacles:

Where is discouragement showing up? What phrases are we hearing that sound like Nehemiah 4:

- "We're tired."
- "There's too much rubble."
- "We'll never be able to do it."

6) Isolation check:

Who is trying to carry too much alone? What would it look like to station people "as families", strengthening teams so nobody fights alone?

7) Rally point:

If discouragement spikes this week, what is our rally point? Who calls the team together? How do we communicate quickly and clearly?

8) Remember the Lord:

What specific truths, Scriptures, or stories of God's faithfulness do we need to put in front of people again to restore courage?

Chapter 6 - Generating Short-Term Wins

Nehemiah 3; 6:15–16 | Kotter Step 6

Generating Short-Term Wins (Kotter's Step 6)

Kotter describes this stage as intentionally creating visible, meaningful progress early enough in the change process to sustain motivation and silence critics. These wins do three things at once:

- They validate the vision
- They reward the effort
- They weaken resistance

Change does not fail most often because the vision is wrong. It fails because people get tired before they see fruit. This is why John Kotter insists that successful change requires **short-term wins**. Progress that people can point to and say, *"Something is actually happening."* Without those wins, momentum fades. Trust erodes. Cynicism grows. And even faithful people begin to wonder whether the effort is worth it. Nehemiah understood this long before modern leadership theory gave it language.

Gates Before Walls



Nehemiah does not begin the rebuilding project by focusing on the longest stretches of wall. Instead, he starts with the **gates**. Again and again in Nehemiah 3, the text tells us that the gates are repaired first (3:1, 3, 6, 13). This is not incidental. Gates matter because they are **visible, functional, and symbolic**. By starting with the gates, Nehemiah gives the people early evidence that the rebuilding effort is not theoretical. It is real. Something that was broken is now standing again. That matters more than we often realize.

Progress Close to Home

Large-scale change can feel overwhelming, especially for people who have lived amid brokenness for a long time. When everything feels ruined, the vision of full restoration can sound abstract, even unrealistic. Nehemiah counters that by ensuring people can **see progress close to home**. Again and again, the text tells us that individuals and families rebuilt the sections of wall **near their own homes** (3:10, 28, 29, 30). This is one of those moments where I read Nehemiah and think, 'That's brilliant.' Then I read it again and think, 'No, really, this is genius.' When people work close to home vision is no longer something Nehemiah is talking about. It is something the people are doing, and doing it where they live. This is how short-term wins work best. Not far away. Not someday. But *right here, right now*.

The Win That Changed Everything

Eventually, all the small wins lead to a defining moment.

Nehemiah 6:15 records it simply: "So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days."

Fifty-two days. For a project of this scale, that is nothing short of astonishing. Notice what the text highlights next:

*Nehemiah 6:16 "When all our enemies heard of it, all the nations around us were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem, **for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.**"*

The win is not only structural, it is spiritual. The completion of the wall reframes the story. Critics are silenced. Opposition loses confidence. The people themselves recognize that what has happened cannot be explained by human effort alone. This is what short-term wins ultimately do: they **re-narrate reality**.

Winning in the Middle

Earlier in this journey, we talked about moving from *here* to *there*. The beginning is exciting. The destination is compelling. The middle is where most people lose heart. I imagine that if we could eavesdrop on some of the conversations happening in Jerusalem during Nehemiah's time, it might have sounded something like this.

Zeb is standing just inside the city, arms crossed, shaking his head as he watches the wall go up. Deena is nearby, wiping her hands after a long day of work.



"I'm telling you, dear," Zeb mutters, "the whole thing is going to potshards."

Deena looks at him. "Sweetheart, I think you're overreacting. I think the new wall is very uplifting."

"The wall is *uplifting*?" Zeb scoffs. "Thank you. I needed a good joke today."

"Well," Deena says calmly, "Nehemiah thinks so. And so do the city officials. And the priests. They keep changing the landscape, though. Pretty soon I won't even be able to see all the way down into the valley anymore."

"And what do you know about building a wall?" Zeb snaps.

Deena shrugs. "You could learn, just like everyone else is learning. One brick at a time. Don't forget what the Lord promised us: that we would prosper when the walls were rebuilt again. That He would take care of us."

Zeb grumbles. "Well, if they keep it up, pretty soon they'll be rebuilding the gates too."

Wouldn't that be grand?" Deena replies.

"That's exactly my point!" Zeb says. "I won't be able to come and go as I please anymore." Deena sighs. "Honey... they're already working on the gates."

Zeb throws up his hands. "See? I'm telling you, it's only going to get worse. And what about all that hammering? And all that singing up on the wall? 'Give thanks to the Lord...' blah, blah, blah. Give thanks for *what?* All the noise?"

"At least you remembered Psalm 136," Deena smiles.

"That's not the point!" Zeb says. "Look at all the new tools they're using. It's like they're copying what the Egyptians do. I don't like it."

"It's okay," Deena says gently. "For centuries, God's people have been learning how to do things better so they can honor Him."

She pauses. "Are you ready to eat?"

"What's for supper?" Zeb asks.

"Quail and bread."

"Again?" Zeb groans. "I'm so tired of that. Can't we have something different, for a change?"[8]

There are always people like that. They show up right in the middle of change. They dampen your spirit. They point out everything that's wrong with the situation you're in. They remind you of what you're losing instead of what's being built. They're not always malicious. But they are skilled at putting the brakes on momentum. You cannot let those voices drown out the voice of the Holy Spirit.



If you are going to be an agent of change, whether in your spiritual life, your family, your marriage, your leadership, or your church, you have to believe that change is actually possible because I've met people who say, "I wish my marriage would get better." That's not believing in change. Believing in change sounds like this: "I'm going to make my marriage better." Some people get stuck analyzing everything to death. They study the wall. They critique the rubble. They debate the tools. They never pick up a brick.

Nehemiah was not a problem analyst. He was a problem solver. He went out. He surveyed the walls. He came back and said, "We've got a big job ahead of us." He didn't have every plan drawn up in advance. He was willing to tackle the problems as they came. That's the rest of Nehemiah's story, one problem solved after another. You will not have all the problems figured out before you start your journey of change. A change-maker is also someone who is willing to take a tangible step.

Maybe that's your spiritual life. You know you should join a Bible study. You decide you're going to do it. Then you start listing all the reasons you can't, kids, schedules, work, exhaustion. At some point, that's not a calendar issue, that's a priority issue. Change requires stepping forward, even when it's inconvenient. It's not a one-time thing. It's something we do together, over a lifetime. If you are going to make a change, make it a *positive* one.

Some people carry painful experiences from their past into every new season. When they're finally ready to change, all those old wounds flood back. **If you are going to bring something from your past into your future, bring the *lessons*, not the *bitterness*.** Because the truth is this: Our journey of change doesn't end until we reach heaven. From here, all the way to heaven or until Christ returns, we are being changed. Scripture is clear:

“We will not all die, but we will all be transformed.”
(1 Corinthians 15)

“He will take our weak mortal bodies and change them into glorious bodies like his own.” (Philippians 3)

“We know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him.” (1 John 3)

One day, we will look back and say, *“Praise God that things are not the way they used to be.”*

JumpStart Application

In [JumpStart](#) language, short-term wins are early experiments that prove something can work before asking everyone to commit fully.

Ask yourself:

- Where can people see progress quickly?
- What outcomes can be celebrated honestly, without exaggeration?
- Who needs to experience success firsthand to become an advocate for change?

Momentum is not created by speeches. It is created by movement.

Theological Reflection

There is something deeply biblical about celebrating progress. Throughout Scripture, God invites His people to mark moments, stones of remembrance, feasts, songs, testimonies. Not because the work is finished, but because faith grows when we remember what God has already done.

Chapter 7 - Sustaining the Momentum

Consolidating Gains and Producing More Change

Nehemiah 7 | Kotter Step 7

One of the great dangers in any season of change is assuming that visible progress means the work is finished. Walls go up. Gates are repaired. People begin to breathe again. Leaders, often exhausted, are tempted to relax. Nehemiah does not. The initial urgency has passed. The threats have been addressed. The people have proven that change is possible. Now comes the harder work: **making sure the change lasts.**

This is what John Kotter describes as *consolidating gains and producing more change*. In other words, leaders must use the credibility earned through early wins to deepen the transformation, changing systems, strengthening leadership, and launching new initiatives that align with the vision. Nehemiah models this beautifully.

The Shift from Urgency to Stewardship

By the time we reach Nehemiah 7, the wall is rebuilt. The city is secure. Yet the work of renewal is far from complete. Nehemiah understands something essential: **walls protect people, but people sustain the future.** Nehemiah begins to delegate authority. He appoints his brother Hanani, along with Hananiah, the commander of the citadel. Scripture gives us a clear reason for this choice:

Nehemiah 7:2 "He was a man of integrity and feared God more than most people do."

This is about **character**. Nehemiah entrusts ongoing leadership to people whose inner life matches the vision he is trying to sustain. These men are multipliers. Under their leadership, new projects begin, most notably, the rebuilding of homes for those returning from exile (Nehemiah 7:1-7). The wall made the city possible again. These leaders make the community livable again.

Sustaining Acceleration Requires Structural Change

Kotter notes that this stage of change requires leaders to do several things at once:

- Use credibility to adjust systems and structures
- Promote and develop people who embody the vision
- Launch new initiatives that reinforce momentum

Nehemiah doesn't simply celebrate the win and move on. He reorganizes leadership. He clarifies responsibility. He ensures that the work of renewal continues beyond the original project.

This is where many leaders struggle. It is one thing to inspire people to start something new. It is another thing to build the systems that allow it to continue. Momentum is fragile. Without intentional leadership, early wins can actually stall future progress.

Leadership Capacity Grows in Stages

In my own journey of leading change, I've learned that sustaining momentum often requires *creative adjustments*, not ideal solutions. Sometimes the best option is not available. Sometimes the perfect leader cannot be found. Sometimes the resources do not yet match the vision.

In those moments, wise leaders ask a different question: *How do we extend our current capacity without exhausting the people we already have?* Rather than forcing a structure that cannot yet be sustained, it is often wiser to strengthen existing leadership, expanding responsibility incrementally, clarifying roles, and allowing time for the community to grow into the next stage. Nehemiah does not rush Jerusalem into becoming something it is not ready to be. He stabilizes. He strengthens. He prepares the ground for future growth.

What made the difference was having an accountability partner, someone I trusted, someone I could speak honestly with, someone who had permission to ask me hard questions. Not long ago, I received a simple text message: *"Martin, I'm checking in. How are you doing? What was followed was a very specific reminder, one that went straight to the heart of the change I was trying to sustain. "And, don't do it alone."*

That kind of accountability does something powerful. It reminds you that the journey matters. It keeps you honest. It keeps you moving forward when it would be easier to drift backward. Change happens when we walk together.

Walking together does not mean listening to every voice. There will always be people who try to slow the work, complicate the process, or quietly undermine progress. Nehemiah experienced that. So will you. Sustaining change requires discernment, knowing which voices are sent to sharpen you and which ones are simply afraid of what the future might require.

At different points in my life, the changes that truly lasted were never the ones I attempted alone.

Identifying Leaders Who Can Carry the Change Forward

One of the most important responsibilities in any season of change is identifying who can lead next, and at what level. Not everyone is called to the same scope of leadership, and not every leader is meant to carry the same weight. As the work shifts from rebuilding walls to rebuilding a community, leadership capacity must expand accordingly. Over the years, I have found it helpful to look for several key markers when identifying potential leaders.

1. Character Comes First

The first and non-negotiable quality of a leader is character. Before asking what someone can do, a leader must ask who they are becoming. Honesty, faithfulness, teachability, self-discipline, dependability, perseverance, and a strong work ethic, these are not optional traits. They are the soil in which leadership either grows or withers.

Patterns of avoiding responsibility, leaving commitments unfinished, blaming others, or consistently missing deadlines are not small issues. They are indicators of character gaps that will eventually undermine trust.

Nehemiah does not overlook this. He entrusts authority to people whose private faithfulness has already been observed.

2. Influence Reveals Leadership Before Titles Do

When I look for potential leaders, I often ask a simple question: *Who do people naturally follow?* Influence can be seen early. Some people organize others without being asked. Some create momentum. Some shape the emotional and spiritual tone of a group simply by their presence. Others look to them for direction, affirmation, or clarity. Influence grows as leadership responsibility grows. A leader who can influence ten people well may be entrusted with more. Influence must be relational, not positional. If people follow only because of a title, leadership will always be fragile. Nehemiah's leaders do not command obedience; they model faithfulness and others respond.

3. Attitude and People Skills Set the Tone

A leader with a positive, grounded attitude creates emotional space for others to engage change without fear. Combined with strong people skills, this kind of leader can effectively lead small teams, often in the range of ten to thirty people, where trust and proximity matter most. These leaders set the tone. They don't just get things done; they shape the culture of how things are done.

4. Capacity Grows with Responsibility

As leadership responsibility expands, from tens to fifties, from fifties to hundreds, new demands emerge. At this level, leaders must demonstrate teachability, resilience, and the ability to learn from mistakes. Self-discipline becomes critical.

The margin for unmanaged weaknesses shrinks. Some leaders thrive in smaller settings and feel no call to expand their influence further. That is not failure, it is clarity. Others stall because they are unwilling to confront character issues that now affect not only themselves, but also the people they lead. Leadership is distributed wisely, according to capacity, not ambition.

The Work Continues

Nehemiah understands something every long-term leader eventually learns: The goal is not simply to complete a project but to shape a people. Trust takes time. Leadership development takes longer still. So Nehemiah keeps going. Not with the same urgency that marked the crisis phase, but with deeper wisdom suited to the next season. He shifts from construction to cultivation. From crisis leadership to sustainable leadership. From doing the work to ensuring the work can continue without him at the center. And that is the work of this chapter.

JumpStart Application

Sustaining Momentum Without Burning People Out

This stage of change is where many teams stall, not because the vision was wrong, but because the leadership capacity was never strengthened to carry it forward.

Nehemiah teaches us that momentum is sustained by **who is empowered next**, not by who works harder.

Use the following JumpStart questions with your leadership team, council, or pilot project group:

1. Who carries credibility right now?

After early wins, people naturally look for trusted leadership.

- Who already has relational trust in the community?
- Who demonstrates integrity, humility, and faithfulness under pressure?
- Who fears God more than they fear people?

These are often the people who should be *expanded*, not replaced.

2. What leadership capacity can be extended rather than replaced?

Instead of asking, *Who do we need to hire?* Ask first, *Whose capacity can we responsibly increase?*

- What responsibilities could be clarified or redistributed?
- Where could additional hours, authority, or focus relieve pressure elsewhere?
- What is sustainable for the next 12–24 months, not just ideal?

3. What systems need adjustment to match the new reality?

Early success exposes outdated structures.

- What worked before the change may now be limiting growth.
- What expectations, processes, or assumptions need revisiting?
- Where are people compensating personally for systems that no longer fit?

Momentum is sustained when systems catch up to vision.

4. Who is walking with you personally?

Leadership sustainability is not only organizational, but also spiritual and relational.

- Who has permission to ask you hard questions?
- Who knows where you are tempted to drift, overwork, or withdraw?
- Who checks in with you not just about results, but about faithfulness?

Do not attempt this stage alone.

5. What is the next project that reinforces, not replaces, the vision?

Nehemiah didn't stop at walls; he moved to homes and community life.

- What next step deepens the original vision rather than distracting from it?
- What new initiative builds on credibility already earned?
- What helps people imagine life *after* the change, not just the change itself?

Chapter 8- Instituting Change

Obedience, Drift, and the Word That Rebuilds Us

Nehemiah 8 | Kotter Step 8

The wall is finished. In just fifty-two days, what had been broken down for decades now stands whole again. The rubble is cleared. The gates are rebuilt. The threat from surrounding nations has quieted. From the outside, it looks like the story could end right there. Nehemiah knows that finishing a project is not the same thing as forming a people. You can build walls, change systems and accomplish goals and still lose your way.

When the Work Stops, the Listening Begins

There is a moment in every season of change when the noise dies down. The urgency eases. The long hours finally give way to something that feels like relief. And it is often right there, not in the crisis, not in the opposition, but in the calm, that drift begins. Drift is subtle. It does not announce itself. It rarely feels rebellious. Most of the time, it feels reasonable. "I've earned a break." "This can wait." "I'll come back to that later." This is a dangerous moment in leadership, not when resistance is loud, but when the work appears finished.

I think of a church in our region. In a relatively short span of time, they saw three pastors come and go. By the time the third pastor left, it was clear that something deeper was going on. Yes, some of those leaders contributed to the tension. No pastor is perfect. It became increasingly obvious that the problem was not only, or even primarily, the person in the pulpit. Something unhealthy had taken root in the life of the congregation itself.

Instead of allowing the pattern to repeat, the regional group of churches, the classis, did something. They told the council that the church could not hire another pastor until they were willing to do some hard internal work. Before moving forward, the congregation had to go for counseling. They needed help uncovering what was really happening beneath the surface. They hired a consultant who addressed what everyone sensed but no one had been naming. A small but influential group quietly undermining leadership, resisting change, and shaping the culture in ways that made it impossible for a pastor to lead effectively. It was painful work. It was also necessary.

Until that deeper issue was addressed, no amount of new leadership was going to bring lasting renewal.



The people of Israel knew this pattern well. Their history was marked by drift. Again and again, God had drawn them back. Again and again, they had wandered. The wall had been rebuilt before. The city had stood strong before. Yet here they were again, rebuilding what had collapsed. Nehemiah understands something crucial at this moment: if something deeper does not change, the wall will only be temporary. **External strength without internal faithfulness never lasts.** That is why what Nehemiah does next matters so much. He does not position himself at the center of the celebration. Instead, he exercises discernment. He recognizes that the work has shifted, and with it, the kind of leadership the moment requires. So, Nehemiah steps back. Ezra steps forward. He knows that strategy rebuilt the wall, but Scripture must rebuild the people. The wall is complete, but renewal requires a different voice, a different posture, and a renewed focus on God's Word.

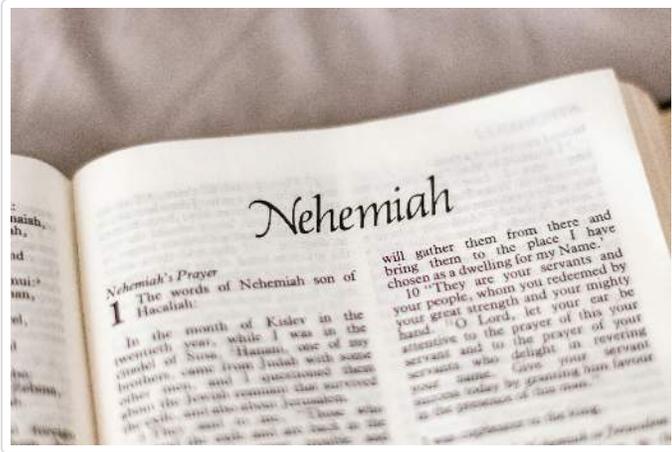
This is where King Saul's story offers a sobering contrast. In 1 Samuel, Saul repeatedly steps beyond what God entrusted to him. Under pressure, he rushes ahead of Samuel and offers sacrifices he was forbidden to offer (1 Samuel 13). Later, he justifies disobedience by pointing to results, public opinion, and urgency (1 Samuel 15). Saul does not lose the kingdom because he lacked opportunity or courage. He loses it because he refused to submit his leadership to God's ordering.

Nehemiah avoids that danger altogether. He understands that faithfulness is not proven by doing everything, but by doing the right thing at the right time. By inviting Ezra to lead the people back to the Law, Nehemiah anchors the next season not in momentum, but in obedience. So, he gathers the people to listen. Ezra opens the Book of the Law. He reads for hours. Men, women, and children old enough to understand stand and listen, many of them hearing these words publicly for the first time in generations. And as they listen, something unexpected happens. They begin to weep.

When the Word Holds Up a Mirror

They hear who God is. They hear what He has promised. They hear what obedience looks like.

Suddenly, they see themselves clearly. This is the moment when people realize how far they have drifted, not in one dramatic step, but over time, through small decisions, neglected practices, and quiet compromises.



It's easy to talk about change as something churches do or organizations manage. But Nehemiah chapter 8 makes it impossible to stay abstract. **Change, at its core, is about obedience. And obedience is always personal before it is communal.** Most people do not wake up one morning and decide to abandon God. Drift happens when prayer becomes optional. When Scripture becomes familiar but no longer formative. When obedience becomes selective instead of wholehearted. The Word exposes that drift. Exposure hurts but exposure is not destruction. It is the beginning of restoration.

Obedience Is Not the Enemy of Joy

As the people weep, Nehemiah and the Levites step in.

Nehemiah 8:11 "Do not mourn or weep... for the joy of the Lord is your strength."

This is where so many of us struggle. We hear Scripture, feel conviction, and assume that the appropriate response is guilt. But Nehemiah points the people somewhere else, toward joy rooted in grace. **This is where revival begins.** Nehemiah does not leave this moment to chance. They are told to eat, to drink, to celebrate, and to share with those who have nothing prepared.

The Levites move among the people, explaining the Scriptures, helping them understand what they are hearing. The Word is not just read; it is interpreted, discussed, and applied.

People do not change simply because they hear truth. They change when truth is processed in community. When questions can be asked. When insight is shared. When understanding grows.

That is why spiritual growth almost always stalls in isolation. Obedience is learned together.

This is also why sustained change requires ongoing input. Scripture cannot be an occasional voice in our lives. It must become a regular lens through which we see everything else. John Calvin once described Scripture as a pair of spectacles that helps us see God clearly. Without it, everything is blurry. With it, the fog begins to lift.

Drift Always Pulls Inward

One of the dangers Nehemiah understands is the tendency for communities, especially successful ones, to turn inward. Growth can quietly replace mission. The people had grown spiritually through listening to the Word. Nehemiah makes sure that growth does not become self-centered. They are instructed to share food with those who have nothing prepared. Obedience is not only vertical; it is relational. Structures matter, systems matter however they only work when they are anchored in obedience to God's Word and a commitment to love others well.

The Question That Remains

As this chapter closes, Nehemiah fades from view, but the question remains very much alive: **Where are you drifting?** Not where you are failing loudly. Not where you are struggling visibly, but where have you slowly stopped listening. Some drift happens because life is hard. Some happens because life is busy. Some happens because things are going well and vigilance fades. The invitation of Nehemiah 8 is not condemnation. It is return. God rebuilds walls, restores people, and honors obedience. Change is never only institutional. It is always personal. When obedience takes root again, slowly, patiently, faithfully, change becomes more than something we manage. It becomes something God sustains.

JumpStart Application

Instituting Change That Lasts

Nehemiah chapter 8 reminds us that lasting change is not secured by finishing a project, it is sustained by forming habits of obedience. Walls can be rebuilt in fifty-two days. Hearts take longer.

1. Name the Drift, Personally First

Before applying this chapter to a team, a church, or a system, start with yourself.

Ask honestly:

- Where has obedience become optional rather than intentional?
- Where has Scripture become familiar but no longer formative?
- Where have you been relying on momentum instead of attentiveness to God?

Drift is rarely dramatic. It shows up in small neglects, less listening, less prayer, fewer pauses to ask what God is saying. Leaders who are willing to name their own drift create space for others to do the same.

2. Re-anchor Change in Scripture, Not Just Strategy

Nehemiah does not reinforce the new culture by tightening controls or announcing new initiatives. He anchors it in the Word of God.

For leaders today, this means asking:

- How is Scripture shaping our decisions, not just supporting them?
- Where are people given space to *understand* the Word, not just hear it?
- What rhythms exist for reflection, discussion, and shared learning?

If change is not rooted in Scripture, it will eventually be driven by preference, pressure, or fatigue. Scripture does not slow change down, it gives it direction.

3. Build Communities of Interpretation, Not Just Communication

In Nehemiah 8, the Levites move among the people, helping them understand what they are hearing. Insight happens in community.

JumpStart leaders should ask:

- Who helps people process what God is saying?
- Where do conversations happen after truth is spoken?
- Who is walking with whom?

Change accelerates when people are not left alone to interpret obedience in isolation.

4. Protect Joy as a Spiritual Discipline

Nehemiah refuses to let conviction end in despair. “The joy of the Lord is your strength” is not a slogan, it is a strategy.

Leaders must model:

- Gratitude alongside growth
- Celebration alongside obedience
- Grace alongside truth

If obedience becomes heavy, people will eventually disengage. If joy is protected, obedience becomes sustainable.

5. Keep the Question Alive

End this chapter not with a plan, but with a question, one worth returning to regularly:

Am I drifting closer to God, or farther away?

For leaders, this question is not optional. Change that lasts is stewarded through ongoing attentiveness, not one-time decisions.

Sources & Further Reading

The resources listed below have shaped the thinking, language, and practices woven throughout this book. They represent a blend of biblical scholarship, leadership theory, missional theology, and lived ministry experience. You do not need to read all of them to lead change well, but each has something valuable to offer for those who want to go deeper.

Leading Change & Organizational Leadership

- **John P. Kotter**, *Leading Change*
The primary leadership framework behind the eight-step change process used throughout this book. Kotter's work offers a clear, adaptable pathway for leading transformational change in complex organizations.
- **Robert E. Quinn**, *Building the Bridge As You Walk On It*
A reflective exploration of personal change, moral courage, and adaptive leadership.

Biblical Leadership & Spiritual Formation

- **The Books of Nehemiah and Ezra**
The primary biblical texts explored in this book, offering a rich picture of prayer-rooted leadership, community renewal, and faithful perseverance.
- **Charles R. Swindoll**, *Hand Me Another Brick*
A pastoral and devotional companion to Nehemiah's story, focusing on encouragement and faithfulness in leadership.

Adaptive Leadership & Leading in Uncertainty

Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*

A leadership framework built on the Lewis and Clark expedition, helping leaders navigate ministry when familiar maps no longer apply.

Susan Beaumont, *How to Lead When You Don't Know Where You're Going: Leading in a Liminal Season*

A wise and pastoral guide for leaders navigating seasons of transition, ambiguity, and disorientation. Beaumont's work is especially helpful for church leaders who sense that the old ways no longer work but the new way has not yet fully emerged.

Companion Tools & Practical Resources

JumpStart: How to Start Something New

A companion course designed to help leaders move from discernment to action through prayer, team formation, and pilot projects.
www.discoverychurch.ca/courses

These sources are not meant to replace prayer, Scripture, or the leading of the Holy Spirit. They are tools, useful only insofar as they help leaders listen more carefully, act more faithfully, and take the next obedient step God places in front of them.

Appendix: John Kotter's Eight Steps and Nehemiah's Leadership Journey

In this e-book, I've drawn on insights from John Kotter's framework for leading change. While Kotter's model is a modern organizational tool, its principles resonate with the ancient story of Nehemiah. Below is a brief overview of each step, re-imagined in the context of Nehemiah's leadership:

1. **Create a Sense of Urgency:** Just as Nehemiah recognized the crisis in Jerusalem and stirred the people's hearts, Kotter emphasizes the need to highlight the urgency of change.
2. **Build a Guiding Coalition:** Nehemiah gathered a group of trusted leaders, priests, nobles, and officials, much like Kotter suggests forming a coalition to drive the change forward.
3. **Form a Strategic Vision and Initiatives:** Nehemiah's careful planning and vision casting align with the importance of developing a clear strategy for change.
4. **Communicate the Vision:** Like Nehemiah rallying the people, Kotter emphasizes the need to communicate the vision repeatedly and clearly.
5. **Empower Broad-Based Action:** Nehemiah removed obstacles and equipped the people to build, just as Kotter advises leaders to remove barriers and empower others.
6. **Generate Short-Term Wins:** Nehemiah celebrated visible progress to keep morale high, reflecting Kotter's focus on achieving early wins.
7. **Sustain Acceleration:** By promoting trustworthy leaders like Hanani, Nehemiah ensured that the momentum of change continued, just as Kotter advises sustaining acceleration by building on gains.
8. **Institute Change in the Culture:** Nehemiah anchored the new practices in the community's spiritual life, mirroring Kotter's principle of embedding changes in the organizational culture.

For a more detailed look at Kotter's methodology, you can visit [Kotter's 8 Steps Methodology](#).

Footnotes

1. (Rainer, *Anatomy of a Revived Church: 7 Findings of How Congregations Avoided Death* 2020, 72) ↑
2. (Rainer, *Anatomy of a Revived Church: 7 Findings of How Congregations Avoided Death* 2020, 82) ↑
3. (Rainer, *Anatomy of a Revived Church: 7 Findings of How Congregations Avoided Death* 2020, 82) ↑
4. (Rainer, *Autopsy of a Deceased Church: 12 Ways to Keep Yours Alive* 2014) ↑
5. William Bridges, *Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2009), 37. ↑
6. Nieuwhof, Carey. 2016. *5 of my favourite leadership insights (and a free trip giveaway)*. March 11. Accessed February 14, 2017. <http://careynieuwhof.com/5-time-top-leadership-learnings-free-trip-giveaway/>. ↑
7. (Sharma 2018, 33) ↑
8. Charles R. Swindoll, *Hand Me Another Brick: Timeless Lessons on Leadership* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998). ↑